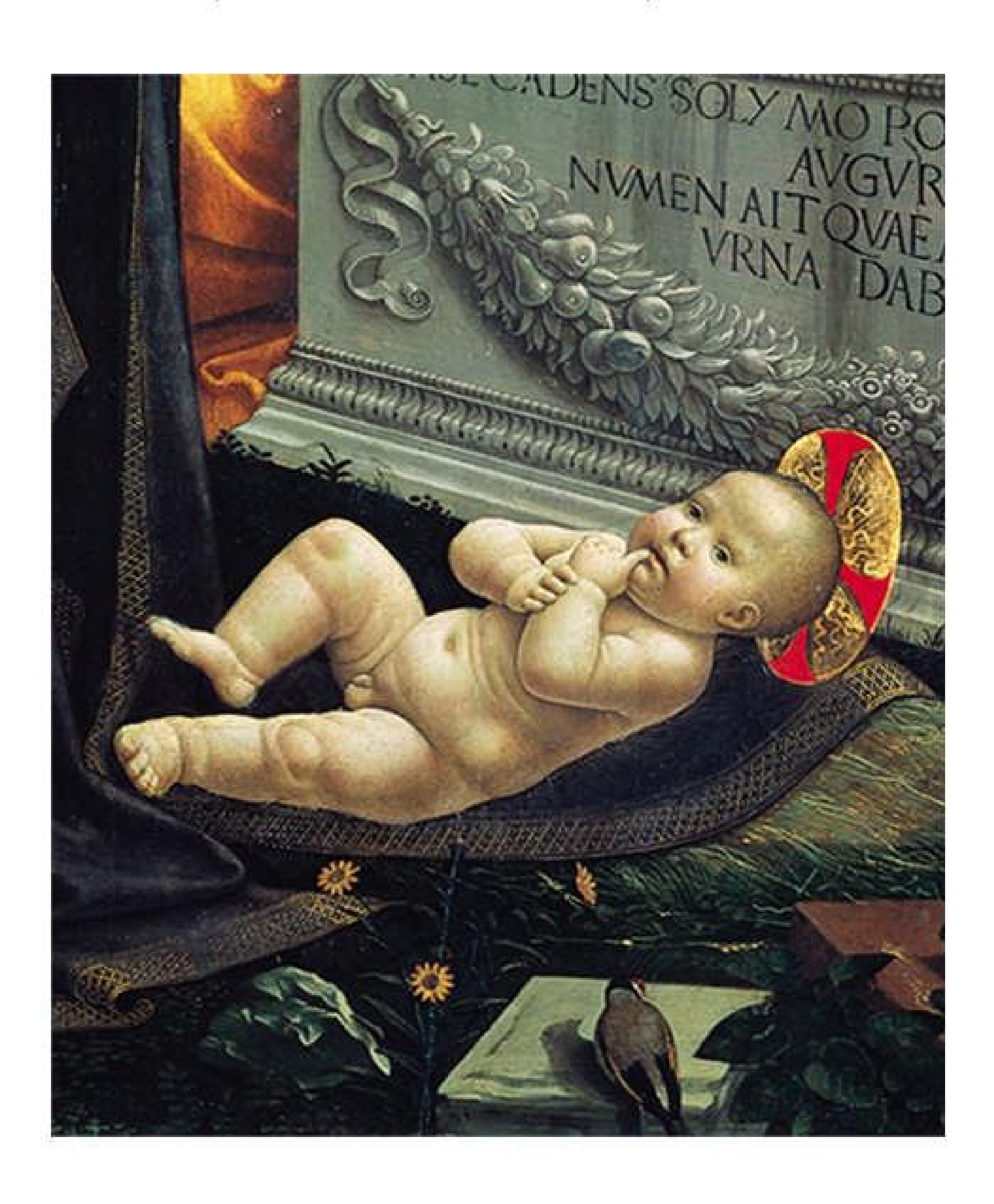
The First Christmas

The Story of Jesus' Birth in History and Tradition



The First Christmas

The Story of Jesus' Birth in History and Tradition

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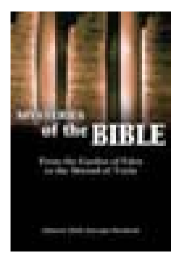
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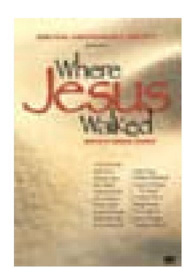
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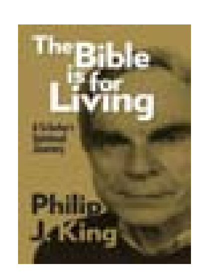
Edited by Molly Dewsnap Meinhardt

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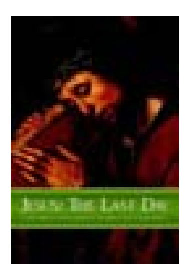
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Introduction

The time-honored traditions of Christmas are dear to the hearts of Christians today. The story of the first Christmas recaptures the imagination as it is retold year after year in Bible readings, carols, Christmas pageants, live manger scenes and crèche displays, to name a few. Perhaps in the midst of all this, we might wonder what the story of Jesus' birth meant to the earliest Christians. How did their story differ from the one we tell today, and what significance did they give to each member of the cast of characters? In the articles that follow, expert Bible scholars and archaeologists offer glimpses of the first Christmas as recounted and understood by those who first told the beloved story.

Early and modern-day Christians alike have been captivated in particular by the three magi in the Christmas story. Author Robin Jensen tells us that early Christian art contains more representations of the adoration of the magi than of the infant Jesus in the manger. What key theological message did the early Christians see in the story of the magi? Jensen uncovers the answer by tracing the magi's numerous appearances in art and literature from the period in "Witnessing the Divine: The Magi in Art and Literature."

Perhaps the most mystifying part of the magi's journey is the star that guides them. Scholars and astronomers have tried for some time to identify a celestial event that corresponds with the magi's guiding star, in part because it would also pinpoint the date of Jesus' birth. Where modern science fails to explain the mysterious star, Babylonian astronomy gives better clues in "The Magi and the Star: Babylonian Astronomy Dates Jesus' Birth" by Simo Parpola.

In contrast, author Dale C. Allison, Jr. does not look to astronomy for an explanation of the magi's star, though he does look heavenward. In "What Was the Star that Guided the Magi," he suggests that another sort of celestial entity was the bright light that guided the magi's journey to pay homage to the infant Jesus.

The star, tradition tells us, led the magi to the tiny Judean town of Bethlehem. However, many scholars of the New Testament have come to the conclusion that Jesus was born in Nazareth, not Bethlehem. Still others remain convinced that the first Christmas took place in

Bethlehem. “Where Was Jesus Born?” offers a two-part exploration of both possibilities. Steve Mason’s “O Little Town of ... Nazareth?” looks at the passages in the Biblical text that suggest Nazareth was Jesus’ birthplace. Jerome Murphy O’Connor supports the Bethlehem tradition using archaeology, the gospels and other ancient texts in “Bethlehem ... Of Course.”

Sara Murphy
December 2009

Witnessing the Divine

The Magi in Art and Literature

By Robin M. Jensen



Collection: The J. Paul Getty Museum

Joseph, Mary and the three magi gaze at the newborn babe in Italian artist Andrea Mantegna's "Adoration of the Magi" (c. 1500). The magi proffer precious gifts: a fine Chinese porcelain bowl filled with gold coins; a censer (for frankincense) made of Turkish tambac ware (an alloy of copper); and a green agate vessel, presumably filled with myrrh.

The varying depictions of the magi in art reflect the varying understandings of the role these mysterious wise men from the East played in early Christian thinking. The magi of Mantegna's painting, for example, with their different skin tones, are depicted as representatives of Europe, Asia and Africa. That's because some early Christians interpreted the gospel story in light of Psalm 72:10–11: "May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts…May all the nations serve him." For early Christians, the international team of magi provided evidence that salvation through Jesus Christ was open to the whole world.

The magi lend an exotic and mysterious air to the Christmas story. The sweet domesticity of mother and child and the bucolic atmosphere of shepherds and stable are disturbed by the arrival of these strangers from the East. The background music changes from major to minor. Sentiment gives way to awe, perhaps even fear.

Nevertheless, or perhaps because of this, the legend of the magi has fired the imagination of Christians since the earliest times. In art, the adoration of the magi appeared earlier and far more frequently than any other scene of Jesus' birth and infancy, including images of the babe in a manger. The artistic evidence suggests that the early church attributed great theological importance to the story of Jesus' first visitors—an importance not overtly stated in this enigmatic gospel account of omens and dreams, astrological signs and precious gifts, fear and flight. To understand how the earliest Christians interpreted the message of the magi, we must look to early Christian literature (theological treatises, sermons and poetry)—and art.

"In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the East came to Jerusalem asking: "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we have observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage."

So opens the second chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, the only biblical account of this nocturnal visit. In vivid contrast to Luke's gospel,[a] Matthew omits any mention of Mary and Joseph's trip to Bethlehem to be registered, a crowded inn, a sheltering manger, or watching shepherds startled by an angel's announcement of the messiah's birth. Instead, the first gospel focuses on the journey of these eastern emissaries, who see an unusual star rising, interpret it as an omen that they should investigate, and follow its path first to King Herod of Judea and then to Bethlehem, where it appears to stop above a house in which a child had recently been born. Entering the house, the men pay homage to the babe and offer him gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Then they leave, having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, who has hatched an evil plot that will lead to the slaughter of innocent children, the weeping of their mothers.

Three shadowy figures (shown here, compare with photo of the Catacomb of Priscilla) approach the Virgin and child, seated at right. Dating to the mid-third century C.E., this fresco from the Catacomb of Priscilla, one of Rome's oldest Christian cemeteries, is the earliest known image of the magi.

The arrival of the magi is the most common scene of Jesus' birth and childhood in early Christian art. In the first images, their appearance is regularized: They appear as three men, wearing short tunics and hats with soft peaks (see the remaining photos in this article). Mary is shown sitting, with Jesus on her lap.



Scala/Art Resource



Scala/Art Resource, NY

As shown in this photo (compare with photo of fresco from the Catacomb of Priscilla), the painting appears above an arch in the oldest section of the catacomb, the Capella Graeca, which is lined with benches—perhaps for ancient funerary meals. (The arch behind it bears an image of seven diners reclining at a table.)

The earliest extant portrayal (see photo of fresco from the Catacomb of Priscilla) of the magi, dated to the mid-third century, appears above an arch in the Catacomb of Priscilla, in Rome.[1] As in almost all the early images of the magi, they are shown as three men, identical in size, dress (although the color of their clothing varies in the catacomb painting) and race. Each carries a gift. It is difficult to discern the presents in the faded catacomb painting, but usually in art one of them carries a wreath and the others a bowl, jug or box-shaped object. The magi advance in a line toward the child seated on his mother's lap. In many early images, they appear to point or gaze at a star overhead. Sometimes their camels appear behind them, as in a fourth-century sarcophagus relief in the Vatican Museums (see photo of fourth-century sarcophagus). The early images almost always appear in funerary settings—on catacomb walls and sarcophagi. The magi

scene is among the first narrative images to appear in Christian art, and predates most other New Testament scenes as well as any other representation of Jesus' nativity (a unique fresco [not shown] of Balaam and the Virgin with child in the Catacomb of Priscilla may be the exception). The complex composition and emphasis on narrative detail provide further evidence of the import the story held.



Scala/Art Resource, NY

A regal procession. Angels flank the enthroned Mary and Jesus in this sixth-century mosaic from Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, Italy. To the left, the magi, followed by a parade of wreath-carrying female martyrs, press toward them.

The names of the magi do not appear in the New Testament, nor does the number. The Gospel of Matthew, the only gospel to mention the magi, speaks simply of "magi from the East." By the second century, they were identified as three; by the fifth, they were identified as kings and, in the West, given the names Balthassar, Melchior and Gaspar (often spelled Caspar), which appear above the magi (perhaps as a late addition) in this mosaic. Here, Balthassar is shown with a long brown beard; eventually he would be identified as an African or Moor. Melchior is a clean-shaven youth. Gaspar has long gray hair; over time, he would become the balding man who kneels before the babe in countless Renaissance images, including the painting at the beginning of this article.

By the fifth century, Christian art had spread from catacombs and sarcophagi to vast public spaces, and the magi began to appear in the mosaic decorations of the first great basilicas. These mosaics share the same basic composition seen in earlier funerary art. In a sixth-century mosaic (above) from the church of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, in Ravenna, Italy, for example, the magi appear as extravagantly dressed triplets, bearing their gifts in fluted vessels as they press forward, gazing up at the star.[b] Before them, the baby Jesus is seated on Mary's lap, flanked by angels.

The magi of the Ravenna mosaic may be distinguished only by their hair (one has long brown hair and a beard; one is a clean-shaven youth; the third is an elderly man, his hair greying)

and their names (most likely a later addition), which are inscribed above them: Balthassar, Melchior and Gaspar (often spelled Caspar).

Neither their names, their number (three), their physical descriptions nor the date of the magi's arrival appears in the Bible. Over time these cherished traditions were added to the brief gospel narrative, probably first through oral tradition. By the fourth century, the magi's arrival was celebrated as the Feast of Epiphany on January 6 (12 days after Jesus' birth on December 25).[2] (Even today, in some parts of the Christian world, January 6, rather than December 25, is a time for exchanging presents, in commemoration of the gifts of the magi.)

Their assumed number was undoubtedly derived from the three gifts presented to Jesus in Matthew. The number wasn't always taken for granted, however. A wall painting in the Roman catacomb of Domitilla shows four magi; one in the catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus depicts two. A variety of Syrian documents name twelve.[3]

The names and nationalities of the magi also varied throughout the world, especially in the East.[4] An Armenian infancy gospel[c] from about 500 lists them as Melkon, King of Persia; Gaspar, King of India; and Baldassar, King of Arabia—and is thus closest to the Melchior, Caspar (or Gaspar) and Balthassar of the medieval Latin church.

As this Armenian infancy gospel indicates, the "magi," a Greek term that might be taken as "sages" or "astrologers" (perhaps even "priests"), had come to be identified with royalty. In 490, the Byzantine emperor Zeno claimed to discover the remains of these "kings" somewhere in Persia and brought them to Constantinople. The relics eventually reached the West during the Crusades—first traveling to Milan and then subsequently to Cologne by Frederick Barbarossa in 1164. Today, they reside in Cologne, in a magnificent reliquary shrine built for them in the late 12th century. There they are known to pilgrims and tourists as the "Three Kings of Cologne."[5]

It took centuries for these traditions to develop, however. In one of the earliest extrabiblical accounts of their journey, the apocryphal infancy gospel known as the Protevangelium of James, the magi remain unnamed and unnumbered.[d] This text, which was probably composed in Syria in about the mid-second century, only expands slightly on Matthew by describing the place where Jesus was born as a cave, rather than a house. (This detail will be familiar to modern pilgrims to Bethlehem who have been ushered into the small cave beneath the Church of the Nativity, where tradition locates Jesus' birth.) The Protevangelium also elaborates on the appearance of the star: The magi tell Herod that all the other stars dimmed in comparison.[6]

The early church fathers interpreted the magi story in light of Old Testament prophecy. Christians understood the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures (the Septuagint) to be a sacred text that contained types and figures pointing to the coming of Jesus as Messiah.

Justin Martyr (died c. 165), in his dialogue with a Jew named Trypho, interprets the magi as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy regarding the coming of the messiah. Justin cites Isaiah 8:4, where the prophet predicts that "before the child knows how to call 'My father' or 'My mother,' the wealth of Damascus and the spoils of Samaria will be carried away by the king of Assyria." For Justin, the magi were priests of an eastern cult and practitioners of magic and astrology. The wealth of Damascus and spoils of Samaria represented the sorcery and idol-worship that the pagan magi gave up when they worshiped Jesus. The magi's visit to the crib was thus their moment of conversion and the renunciation of their misguided, idolatrous practices. And so Justin reads Matthew's story as a sign to the world that Christianity was the true and pure faith.[7]



Photo by Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra

Can you tell the difference? The fresco shown here (compare with photo of fresco depicting three magi) depicts the three youths who refused on pain of death to worship an idol in the Persian court (Daniel 3). They were thrown into a fiery furnace, where they were saved only by invoking the name of the Israelite God. In this painting, a Persian official stands to their right, pointing at the idol, which is shown as an imperial bust.



Photo by Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra

In this fresco (compare with photo of fresco depicting three youths), the three magi appear almost identical to the three youths. These fourth-century paintings appear together in the Catacomb of Marcus and Marcellianus in Rome.

The similarity in the portrayal of the youths and the magi reflects the similar interpretation of their stories by the early church. According to the second-century church father Justin Martyr, the magi were pagan sorcerers and astrologers from the East. When they saw the babe, they renounced their pagan ways. Like the three youths, they recognized the true God and refused to commit idolatry.

Writing from Carthage a generation after Justin, the apostolic father Tertullian expanded on Justin's arguments, suggesting that the magi's dream instructing them to go home by another route was not only to be understood literally, but as an admonition to forsake their former idolatrous habits and practices.[8]

This popular interpretation is reflected in art, which often links the three magi with the three Hebrew youths in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3) and with Daniel in the lions' den (Daniel 6)—all easterners (Daniel and the Hebrew youths lived in the Persian court) who used their gifts of prophecy, dream interpretation and perhaps even magic to resist the evil of pagan idolatry. In art, the magi and these figures are connected in two ways: First, the magi, like the three youths, are usually garbed in the clothing that Romans associated with Persians and other easterners: short, belted tunics, cloaks pinned at one shoulder, soft pointed boots and peaked caps.[9] Second, images of the magi are often paired with the three youths or Daniel, as in the fourth-century catacomb of Marcus and Marcellianus, in Rome (see photos, above), where paintings of the magi and the three youths are grouped together. In at least one image, the three youths from Daniel and the magi are conflated: On a fourth-century sarcophagus relief from St. Gilles, France, three men in eastern dress turn away from an idol and toward a star (see photo, below).[10]



Sarcophages Chretiens de la Gaule

The parallel between the three youths and the three magi is made sharper in a fourth-century sarcophagus relief (shown here, compare with photos of frescoes from the Catacomb of Marcus and Marcellianus in Rome) from St. Gilles, in Arles, France. Here, three eastern men turn away from a Persian official standing beside an idol and point toward the Star of Bethlehem.

The magi's special role as witnesses to the true faith was also noted by the church father Origen, who read the magi's stories in light of the prophecies of Balaam. According to Origen, after the star appeared to the magi, they noticed that their magic spells faltered and their power was sapped. Consulting their books, they discovered the prophecy of the oracle-reader Balaam, who saw a rising star "com[ing] out of Jacob" (Numbers 24:17) that indicated the advent of a great ruler of Israel. The magi thus conjectured that this ruler had entered the world. So, the magi traveled to Judea to find this ruler, and based on their reading of Balaam's prophecy, the appearance of the comet and their loss of strength, they determined that he must be superior to any ordinary human—that his nature must be both human and divine.[11] The magi, for Origen, are not simply Jesus' first visitors, but the first to recognize Jesus as messiah.

Whether or not Matthew intended to link Balaam's star with the magi's, the early church certainly did. Balaam's figure may be barely discerned behind Mary and Jesus in the painting (see photo of fresco from the Catacomb of Priscilla) of the Adoration from the Catacomb of Priscilla. He also appears on the fourth-century funerary epitaph of a woman named Severa, where Balaam stands behind Mary, pointing at the star as the magi approach (see photo of inscription from fourth-century funerary plaque).[12]

By the third century, biblical interpreters were finding echoes of Psalm 72 in the narrative of the three gift-bearing visitors: "May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts! May all kings fall down before him, may all nations serve him" (Psalm 72:10–11). The magi were identified as these kings of "all nations" who worshiped the Christian messiah, bowing down to give him homage. They became a potent sign that Christ's salvation was predicted and open to the whole world. The rising of the new star marked the coming of the new age envisioned in the Old Testament.



Scala/Art Resource, NY

"Severa—may you live in God" reads the inscription on this fourth-century funerary plaque from the Catacomb of Priscilla, in Rome. Severa appears at left; at right is the familiar magi scene, with an unusual addition: A man standing behind Mary points out the star. Although some art historians have speculated that this is Joseph, others believe it represents the Old Testament prophet Balaam, who predicted that a rising star coming out of Jacob would herald a great ruler of Israel (Numbers 24:17). According to the second-century church father Origen, the magi headed to Judea after reading Balaam's prophecy.

The passage from Psalms cemented the magi's identification as kings and led to a fresh understanding of their origins.[13] The earliest writers had understood the magi to come from one region (usually identified as Persia).[14] But in the eighth century, the Anglo-Saxon historian and theologian known as the Venerable Bede recorded a later tradition that the three magi signified the three parts of the world—Africa, Asia and Europe—and that they thus might be linked with the sons of Noah, who fathered the three races of Earth (Genesis 10).

This development is also reflected in art. In the earliest sarcophagi reliefs and catacomb paintings, the magi appear to be three of a kind, all in "eastern" dress. Gradually, however, each acquires distinguishing characteristics. As we have seen, in the sixth-century mosaic from Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, the magi are represented as being different ages, with different color hair. By the 14th century, one of the three would appear as black (see photo of Andrea Mantegna's "Adoration of the Magi").[15] As "kings" of all nations, the men also wear elaborate golden crowns in many later paintings.[16]

What may be the most impressive and influential understanding of the magi weaves together many of the interpretations expressed by the church fathers: that the magi were the world's first witnesses to the Trinity. This explains their appearance in almost all artistic images and literary traditions as three men, different, but alike.

The fourth and fifth centuries (when many of the images of the magi shown here were made) were a time of great theological debate—first over the relationships of the three persons of the Trinity, and subsequently about the human and divine natures of Jesus Christ. As the first visitors to recognize who this newborn child was, and what his birth would mean to the whole

world, the witness of the magi was not insignificant to these controversies. Their three gifts seemed to demonstrate their prescient understanding of the three distinct persons who shared a single "nature" within the Trinity, as well as the different roles of the two separate but inseparable natures in the single person—the incarnate Jesus.

The second-century church father Irenaeus of Lyons alluded to this role of the magi in his allegorical interpretation of the magi's gifts. According to Irenaeus, the magi offered Jesus myrrh (used for anointing corpses) to indicate that he was to die and be buried for the sake of mortal humans, gold because he was a king of an eternal kingdom, and frankincense (burnt on altars as divine offerings) because he was a god.[17]

Pope Leo the Great, whose writings on the divine and human nature of Jesus influenced the final formula for the orthodox Chalcedonian creed (451), wove together the ideas of Irenaeus (on Jesus' nature) and Justin (on the renunciation of idolatry) when he emphasized that the conversion of the magi provides proof of Jesus' two-fold nature (human and divine) as well as his status as king (both Davidic and heavenly). In addition, Leo hints that the journey of the magi to Jesus could be interpreted as an allegory of the journey of the individual soul to God, as the star's light still might penetrate both the human mind and heart, showing it the way to truth. In his sermons on the Epiphany, Leo wrote:

> How did it come to be that these men, who left their home country without having seen Jesus, and had not noticed anything in his appearance to enforce such systematic adoration, offered these particular gifts? It was the star that attracted their eyes, but the rays of truth also penetrated their hearts, so that before they started on their toilsome journey, they first understood that the One who was promised was owed gold as royalty, incense as divinity, and myrrh as mortal…and so it was of great advantage to us future people that this infant should be witnessed by these wise men.[18]



Giraudon/Art Resource, NY

Heavenly light suffuses this 15th-century Nativity scene. The divine presence is emphasized through the inclusion of the Trinity: God the Father appears at top, surrounded by a host of cherubim; the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descends on golden rays; and the Son is cradled in the wings of angels.

Early Christian writers noted that the magi, the first visitors to recognize Jesus as messiah, were thus also the first witnesses to the Trinity. Each magus was described as recognizing a different aspect of Jesus: mortal, divine and eternal. Their affiliation with the Trinity, suggests author Robin Jensen, might explain why they are almost always depicted as three.

This illumination appears in the prayerbook *Les Très Riches Heures*, produced by the Limbourg Brothers for the French Duke of Berry. It is now in the Musée Condé, in Chantilly, France.

Centuries later, artists would depict what the magi were believed to have witnessed—the Trinity made manifest at the Nativity. The birth scene in the early-15th-century manuscript known as Les très riches heures du Duc de Berry, illuminated by the Limbourg brothers, includes God the Father in a cloud; the Spirit in the form of a descending dove; and the Son, the newborn babe lying on a bed of hay (see photo of early-15th-century Nativity scene).



Courtesy of Robin M. Jensen

The promise of salvation is represented by paired scenes of Jesus raising the dead (left) and the magi approaching the babe (right) on this fourth-century sarcophagus, from the Vatican's Museo Pio Cristiano. As the first to recognize Jesus as messiah, the magi, according to the early church, were also the first to recognize the promise of eternal life through resurrection. This hopeful message of the magi accounts for their frequent appearance in funerary settings

Gifted with power to divine oracles and read stars, the magi recognized the child as the messiah, as both human and divine, king and child, intimately present and cosmically meaningful, mortal and eternal. For the early church, the magi themselves came to represent the Trinity. A final image of the magi, paired on a fourth-century marble sarcophagus with a scene of Jesus raising the dead (see photo, above), reinforces why their image appears so early and so frequently in funerary settings. In recognizing the promise of a messiah who was both human and divine—and eternal—the magi provided a message of hope for both the living and the dead.

This article first appeared in Bible Review *magazine, December 2001. You can view this article fully illustrated in the BAS Library, along with more than 30 years of articles by the world's foremost scholars of Biblical archaeology and related fields.*

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The Magi and the Star

Babylonian astronomy dates Jesus' birth

By Simo Parpola



Photo courtesy of The Grand Design, Leeds, England/Superstock.

Bearing gifts for the "child who has been born king of the Jews" (Matthew 2:2), the three magi travel over hill and through dale, past trees waving in the evening breeze and along a flowing river in British artist Tom Clark's colorful 1994 rendering, We Three Kings.

The wondrous star that hovered over Bethlehem at Jesus' birth has long mystified Bible scholars and astronomers alike. Attempts to identify the star with historical celestial phenomena have been inconclusive at best, leading many to dismiss the gospel account as a beautiful but imaginative myth. Still others keep returning to this question, knowing that if we could only link the star with a specific celestial event, we could also pinpoint the date of Jesus' birth. For although today we celebrate the birth of Jesus in 1 C.E., most scholars believe he was actually born sometime between 7 and 4 B.C.E., based on the Gospel of Matthew, which indicates that Jesus was born late in the reign of King Herod of Judea, who died in 4 B.C.E.[a]

I believe that Babylonian astronomy may provide the key to identifying the star and to dating Jesus' birth: That's because the Gospel of Matthew tells us that the magi—astronomers from the East—believed that the star would lead them to a new king. Why? What did the magi know?

According to Matthew, after Jesus was born "magi from the East arrived in Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? We have observed the rising of his star, and we have come to pay him homage'" (Matthew 2:2).

Herod was, of course, disturbed by the news. He called his chief priests and scribes before him and asked them where such a child would be born. They said Bethlehem (where King David, whose scion would be the messiah, had been born). Herod then instructed the magi to continue on their journey to Bethlehem: "Go and search diligently for the child," Herod advised. "When you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage" (Matthew 2:8). Once they found the child, Herod advised, they should report back to him. Secretly, the king planned to destroy the infant.

The magi set out on the road to Bethlehem. "The star that they had seen in its rising went ahead of them until it stopped above the place where the child lay. At the sight of the star, they were overjoyed. Entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and bowed to the ground in homage to him; then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh" (Matthew 2:9–11). Having been warned in a dream of Herod's malicious intent, the magi returned home "by another road" (Matthew 2:12).

The term Matthew uses, *magoi* ("magi" in English), refers to Persian astronomers or scholars, although it is often translated simply as "wise men." Matthew does not mention the names or the number of these wise men, but according to later Christian tradition, there were three: Balthassar, Melchior and Caspar. (For more on the magi in later traditions, see the previous article.) Balthassar is a Greek corruption of the Babylonian name Belshazzar (*Beμl-sáar-us\ur*, or more simply *Bel-shar-usur*) familiar from the Book of Daniel; it means "O Lord, protect the king." Melchior, which means "The king is my light," is an Aramaic name often encountered in Assyrian and Babylonian texts. *Caspar* (sometimes spelled Gaspar) is a Roman corruption of Gondophares (Gadaspar), a Parthian name (the language of the people who ruled Persia in Matthew's time). The names of the magi suggest that they came from Babylon, a Parthian royal city and one of the most important centers of astronomical and astrological knowledge of the day.

From its beginnings in the early second millennium B.C.E., Babylonian astronomy was linked with astrology and divination. The royal courts used astronomy to interpret celestial events, which were understood as portents sent from the gods to the king. Every day, month, part of the sky and celestial body or phenomenon had a significance of its own. An eclipse of the moon, for example, might be interpreted as a sign that the king would die. By the fifth century B.C.E., personal horoscopes were being used to predict an individual's future based on the positions of

the planets in various constellations at the time of his or her birth (that is, based on the astrological significance of both the planets in the night sky at the time of the birth and the constellations in front of which the planets appeared).

The work of Babylonian astronomers was, of course, limited to what could be seen by the naked eye, for the telescope would not be invented until the Renaissance.[b] In planetary terms, this meant astronomers could observe the movements of Mercury, Venus, Mars, Saturn and Jupiter, but not Uranus, Neptune and Pluto. Nevertheless, between 220 B.C.E. and 75 C.E., Babylonian astronomy had advanced so far that all significant phenomena involving these five visible planets and the moon could be accurately computed in advance. This is demonstrated in the many Babylonian astronomical almanacs that have survived from this period. Like modern almanacs, the Babylonian texts were prepared a year in advance and provide a month-by-month account of what would be seen in the night sky. The data include lunar and solar eclipses, solstices and equinoxes, the first and last dates when stars would be visible in the night sky, planetary positions in relation to the zodiacal signs, conjunctions (when celestial bodies appear closest to each other in the sky) and oppositions (when a planet appears on the opposite side of the Earth from the sun; this usually occurs when the planet is closest to Earth, as in the top diagram in the sidebar to this article.

Today, we know of several astronomical events that enlivened the night sky in the last years of the first millennium B.C.E. and the beginning of the first millennium C.E. Identifying one of these as the Star of Bethlehem would give us the date of Jesus' birth.

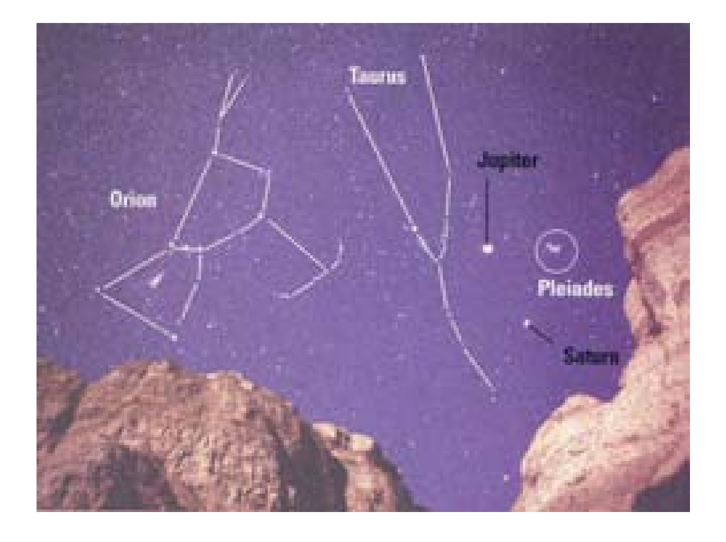
Among the possible candidates is an exceptional light phenomenon—possibly a nova (a star that suddenly increases in brightness) or a supernova (a giant stellar explosion)—known from ancient Chinese records to have occurred in the constellation of Capricorn in 5 B.C.E. However, unlike the Star of Bethlehem in the Gospel of Matthew, novas do not move but remain stationary in relation to the fixed stars, so this possibility must be rejected as unsatisfactory. Chinese and Roman sources also record an appearance of Halley's comet from August to October in 12 B.C.E.; but this date is too far from the death of Herod to be considered seriously. No other suitable observations of comets are known from this period.

Another possibility is a conjunction of Venus and Jupiter in 2 B.C.E. During a conjunction, two planets appear close to each other in the night sky (see photo, below). In 2 B.C.E., Jupiter and Venus came so close together that they appeared to merge into a single brilliant star, although only for a very short duration—a maximum of two hours before their setting. Nevertheless, this conjunction must be dismissed because it occurred after Herod's death.



Jerry Schad

The most recent conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn occurred in Taurus, in December 2000. Taken on December 16, 2000, in the Carrizo Badlands of California, this photo shows the conjunction from the west at approximately 3 a.m. The sky is illuminated by the light of a third-quarter moon. To the left in the photo is the constellation Orion, the hunter, lifting his weapon towards the great bull Taurus (see drawing of conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn). Jupiter and Saturn are just to the right of the bull's front legs (indicated by the gently curving line of stars beneath his horns). Jupiter and Saturn will next come into conjunction in 2020.



Jerry Schad

Drawing of conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn (compare with photo of conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn).

The only remaining candidate is a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 7 B.C.E.[1] Already in 1604 Johannes Kepler associated this event with the birth of Jesus. However, Jupiter and Saturn did not come close enough to each other during this conjunction to be seen as a single exceptionally bright star. Rather, they remained at least one degree apart (about two diameters of the moon), leading one scholar to conclude: "This fact renders it impossible to explain the Star of Bethlehem with reference to that particular conjunction."[2]

It thus seems that from the viewpoint of modern science, the Star of Bethlehem cannot be satisfactorily explained. We will have better luck, however, if we turn to ancient science, which sheds light on how the magi themselves would have understood these celestial phenomena, in particular the conjunction of 7 B.C.E. For although modern scholars might find it “impossible” to identify this conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter with the magi’s star, Babylonian astronomers used the term kakkabu, “star,” to refer to a single star or planet as well as a constellation.

Further evidence of how ancient astronomers would have understood this conjunction has been revealed by excavations in Babylon, which have uncovered four clay tablets bearing astronomical computations for the year 7 B.C.E.[c] This almanac indicates that, from the beginning of the year, Jupiter and Saturn were continuously visible in Pisces for 11 months. In other words, for most of the year the constellation Pisces served as a backdrop for the planets Jupiter and Saturn as they traveled slowly through the night sky. The movements, stationary points, risings and settings of both planets are accurately registered month by month (see the sidebar to this article). They came closest together on three nights in May, October and December. It appears from the almanac that toward the end of the conjunction, Mars also moved into Pisces; it was visible near Jupiter and Saturn in mid-February.

That the almanac survives in four copies is remarkable, and, indeed, quite exceptional. The overwhelming majority (85 percent) of the known almanacs are available in one copy only, and only two other almanacs are available in four or more copies.[d] Unlike modern almanacs, Babylonian almanacs were not drawn up for the general public but for the private use of a handful of experts, and they were guarded as great scholarly secrets. That so many copies exist of this one is all the more surprising when one considers its date: Cuneiform texts become rare in the latter half of the first century B.C.E. (the latest known cuneiform tablet dates from 75 C.E. and there are only four cuneiform tablets altogether from the Christian Era).

The great number of copies has an obvious explanation, however: An 11-month conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in Pisces is an extremely rare event, occurring only once every 800 years. Because of the slow rotational velocity of both Jupiter (which has a 12-year orbit around the sun) and Saturn (29.5 years), any conjunction of these planets (the so-called “great conjunction”) will only happen every 20 years. The 11-month conjunction of 7 B.C.E., however, was special in that the planets met three times in succession in the same constellation. It can occur only when both planets are in opposition to the sun; that is, the sun is on the opposite side of the Earth from the planets (see the sidebar to this article). Since 7 B.C.E. a triple conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter has been observed only twice, in the years 786 and 1583.

For the ancient Babylonian magi, however, the conjunction was not only important astronomically, but astrologically and politically.

In the Babylonian system, Jupiter, the largest and brightest planet, was known as the star of Marduk, the supreme god of Babylon. Saturn, the second largest planet, was the star of the king, the earthly representative of the god. The Babylonians called Saturn *Kaiwaμnu*, "The Steady One." The constellation Pisces was associated with Ea, the god of wisdom, life and creation. Pisces was also the last sign in the zodiac—that is, the last constellation that the sun passed through each year (see the sidebar to this article). The conjunction of the planets in Pisces accordingly portended two things: the end of the old world order and the birth of a new savior king chosen by God. No Babylonian interpretation of this particular conjunction is extant—surely because of the great rarity of the event—but we know that interpretations of planetary conjunctions were based on an analysis of the astrological significance of the planets and the accompanying circumstances, particularly the zodiacal sign in which the conjunction took place. The fact that Mars, the star of Nergal, the god of war,[e] joined the conjunction in its final phase signified that the new king was to come from the West, specifically, from Syria-Palestine, for Mars was the star of Amurru or the West (Syria-Palestine) in the Babylonian system.

The prediction of such a king would have held wide interest in 7 B.C.E., when a power vacuum of sorts prevailed in the Near East. The Seleucid empire created by the successors of Alexander the Great had collapsed in 64 B.C.E., and its remnants, which included Judea, had been annexed to Rome as a province named Syria. The power of Rome had not yet been consolidated in the area, however. Even after Augustus changed Rome into an autocratic monarchy in 27 B.C.E., his authority was questioned in the East, for the Roman emperor, unlike the Seleucid kings and their predecessors, did not derive his authority from God. For this reason, many people considered Roman rule illegitimate and hoped that a local Near Eastern king appointed by God would drive the Romans out of the country and create a better world. These messianic expectations are recorded by Josephus and reflected in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The conjunction of 7 B.C.E. would have been interpreted as a portent of the birth of precisely this kind of king. The political vistas opened by it would not have escaped the attention of any Babylonian astrologer.

When the year 7 B.C.E. began, Jupiter was already visible in the night sky. Saturn appeared soon after, on the third day of the first month, Nisan (at the beginning of April). The planets met for the first time on May 27, rising in the east at about 2 o'clock in the morning, the brighter Jupiter first, and Saturn, considerably dimmer, soon after it.

The second meeting of the planets occurred on the 22nd of Tishri (October 6). Just as Mars was the star of Amurru (the West), Tishri was known as the month of Amurru. This second meeting may have inspired the magi to head West. That they chose to visit Herod's court is natural, as he was unquestionably one of the most powerful kings of Syria-Palestine.

The magi would have seen a brilliant and suggestive sight. Jupiter and Saturn were in opposition to the sun and shining at their brightest, with Jupiter (the star of the supreme god) appearing twice as bright as Sirius, the brightest star. Appearing directly above Saturn (the star of the king), Jupiter thus seemed to embrace and protect Saturn in its light. The conjunction was visible through the whole night, setting in the West. For the magi, the significance resided in the astrological message, not the appearance: Matthew nowhere stresses the brightness of the star.

The journey of about 750 miles from Babylon to Jerusalem took about three weeks by donkey or camel. If the magi left for Syria-Palestine in early Tishri (October), they would have arrived there well before November 7, when Jupiter reached a stationary point (its second) and for a moment seemed to come to a stop. This occurs whenever the Earth, traveling at a faster rate in its smaller, inner orbit, catches up with Jupiter (or any outer planet). As the Earth overtakes the planet, Jupiter appears from our vantage point to pause in the sky, then to travel backward (westward) in retrograde motion until Earth has passed by. The planet then pauses a second time and turns back in an easterly direction (see the sidebar to this article). On November 20, Saturn reached its (second) stationary point. Both dates—the 7th for Jupiter and 20th for Saturn—would fit Matthew's description of a star stopping above Bethlehem.

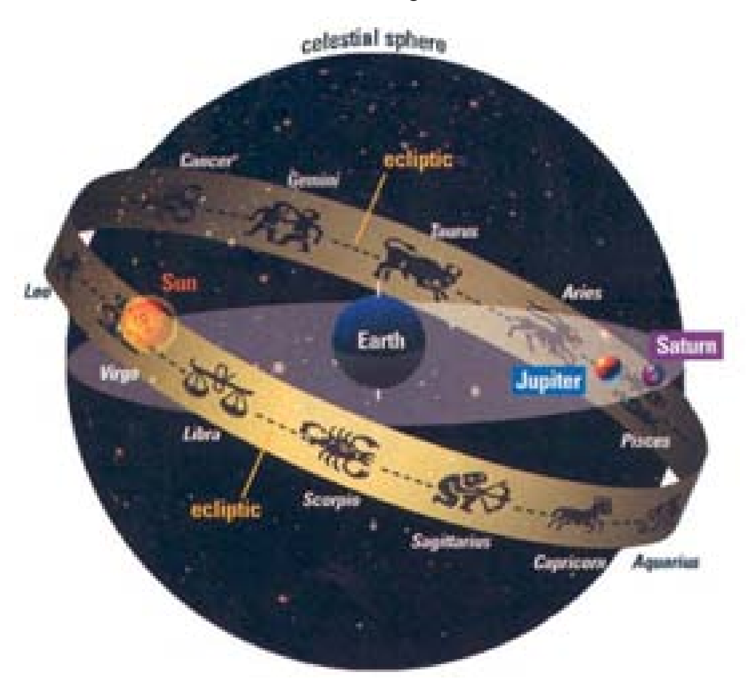
The third conjunction occurred at the time of the full moon, on the 14th of Kislev (December 1), about three weeks before the winter solstice, when the Babylonians held their annual celebration of the victory of their savior god, Nabû, over the forces of darkness. The magi may well have associated the birth of the child they were looking for with this festival, for the Mesopotamian king was commonly regarded as an incarnation of Nabû. Interestingly, the Babylonians proclaimed Nabû's victory as "good tidings" (*bussuraµti*) to all the people. *Bussurtu*, "good tidings," is the same word as Hebrew/Aramaic *besorah*, of which the Biblical *euangelion* (gospel) is a Greek translation.

In Luke, the angel uses this very term to announce Jesus' birth to the shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night: "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news [*euangelion* = *bussurtu*] of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord" (Luke 2:10–11).

How could a star lead the magi to Jerusalem and Bethlehem?[f] These Babylonian astronomers would have "followed" a star only based on its astrological significance. In 7 B.C.E., they read the message of the "star"—that a messiah-king would be born in Syria-Palestine—and they headed to a leading political center in the region, King Herod's court. There they were directed to Bethlehem; as they traveled, both the planet of the king (Saturn) and the planet of the supreme god (Jupiter) would have paused in the sky, as planets do when the Earth overtakes them in their orbit. In late December, at the winter solstice, the magi would have rejoiced with good news, or *bussuraµti*: Their savior king was born—several years before the Christian Era even began!

What the Magi Saw

Sidebar to: The Magi and the Star



The Triple Conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn

Ancient astronomers believed that the Earth was the center of the universe. They thought that the sun, moon and the five visible planets—Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn—circled around the Earth at different distances and speeds. Farthest away was the great celestial sphere in which the stars, and the constellations they formed, were embedded. The constellations on the celestial sphere thus appeared as a backdrop to the sun, moon and planets as they moved across the heavens.

The group of 12 constellations in front of which the sun, moon and planets appear to move are probably the best-known features of the night sky: They are the constellations of the zodiac—Aquarius, Pisces, Aries, Taurus and so on. The band along which these constellations appear is called the ecliptic. In the drawing below, for example, the sun is “in” (really, in front of) Virgo. Of course, the ancients could never really see the sun in any particular constellation since the stars aren’t visible in the daytime; but since they were familiar with the order of the zodiac and the sun’s rising and setting throughout the year, they could easily calculate which constellation the sun was “in,” even if they couldn’t see it. It is much easier to see a planet in a constellation at night, as shown in the photo taken on December 16, 2000, which shows a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in Taurus (see photo of conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn).

Whereas the sun makes a smooth journey across the ecliptic, spending exactly one month in each of the zodiac’s 12 constellations, the planets behave much more strangely. Their motion is erratic—at times changing speed, and even changing direction. In fact the word planet comes from the Greek word *planeμteμs*, meaning “wanderer” or “nomad.” The outer planets Mars, Jupiter and Saturn, for example, spend most of the year traveling eastward against the backdrop of stars, but every so often, and almost always at separate times, each planet will appear to make a loop or switchback in its journey. It will slow down, “stop” and then travel back toward the west for a short distance—in what astronomers call retrograde motion—then it will slow down again, stop and resume travel in an easterly direction.

Early astronomers came up with ingenious theories to explain the planets’ strange behavior. In about 87 C.E., the Alexandrian astronomer Ptolemy suggested that each planet moved in small circles or “epicycles” as it moved along its greater orbit around the Earth. Like wheels-within-wheels, these epicycles helped explain why sometimes a planet would appear to move relatively quickly across the sky from night to night, while at other times it would slow down and change direction for brief periods.

It wasn’t until the 16th century that the much simpler truth of the matter was finally recognized. The Polish astronomer Copernicus realized that the retrograde motion of planets was actually an illusion due to the fact that the sun, not the Earth, was the center of the solar system, and that the Earth was just another planet circling it.

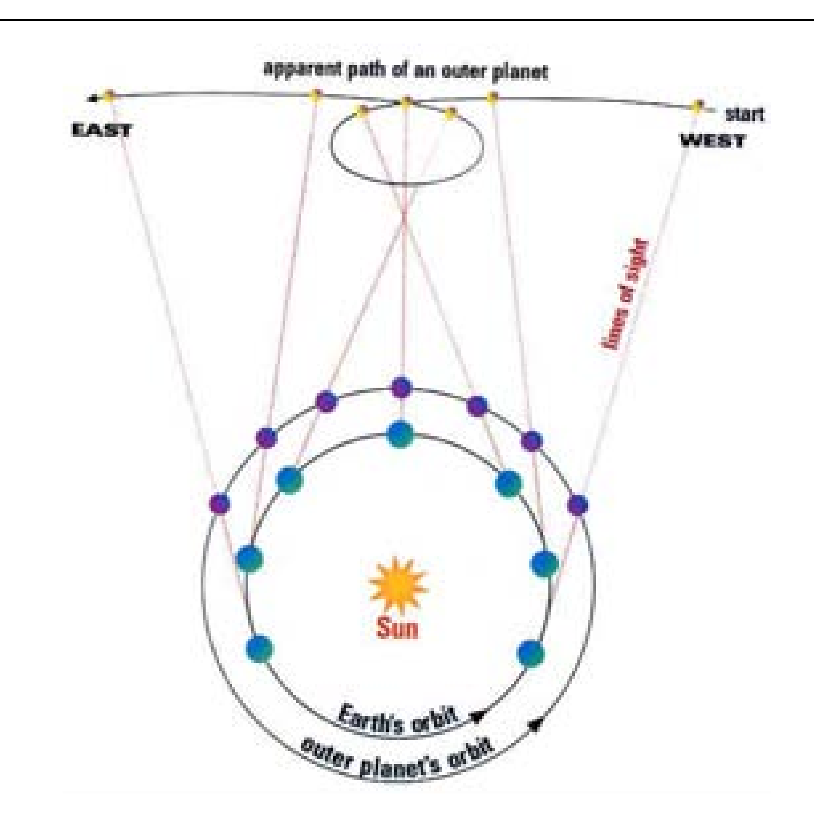
To understand Copernicus’s insight, and to grasp why the planets aren’t really traveling backward even if they seem to at times, imagine a racetrack with several lanes, with the sun in the center. Each planet is a car, racing around the sun in the same, counterclockwise direction, and always staying in its own lane—Mercury on the inside track, Venus next to it, then Earth, Mars, Jupiter and finally Saturn. (Later astronomers discovered more planets, of course, but they

aren't visible without telescopes.) And no racetrack would be complete without the grandstands that surround it, where people sit and watch the race. These are the stars, farther from the sun than any planet, and (for all practical purposes) motionless.

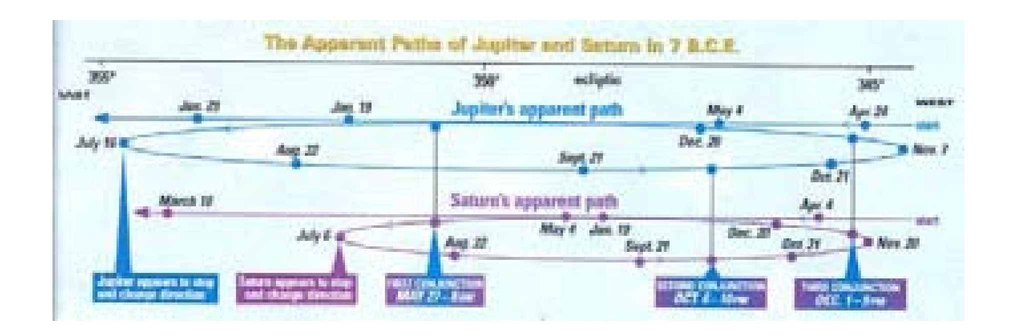
This planetary race is fixed: Not only do the cars/planets in the inner lanes always go faster than those in the outer lanes, but every car also has an added advantage over the car immediately to its right: It has less far to go to complete a lap. So in this imaginary racetrack, Mercury always wins, Venus always comes in second, Earth third, and so on. (Poor Saturn!) And since every car travels around this racetrack counterclockwise, passing is always on the left.

Now, if you're driving the third car and watching one of the slower cars on the outer tracks to your right—say car five—as you overtake it, your opponent will seem to slow down and actually move backward relative to the fans sitting farther away in the bleachers. But when you've put some distance between you and car five, you will again be able to see clearly that it's moving forward the same way you are. Its backward movement was just an illusion produced by the relative motion of your two cars and a more distant point of reference. (You can observe this phenomenon on an ordinary highway too: While you're passing a car next to you, it will briefly seem to move backward relative to the more distant trees even though you know it is actually going forward.)

The apparent backward motion of the planets that are farther from the sun than the Earth—Mars, Jupiter and Saturn—against the backdrop of stars is no different. It happens each time the Earth overtakes or "laps" these slower planets as we make our yearly journey around the sun. The Earth overtakes an outer planet when it is in opposition to the sun; that is, the sun, Earth and planet are aligned with the Earth in the middle, as shown in the drawing below. In this drawing, Earth and an outer planet are shown at various stages in their orbits around the sun. The looping line at top shows how the outer planet appears to travel across the sky, starting in the west (at right), when viewed from Earth. As Earth overtakes the planet, the planet appears to loop backward, although of course it's still moving forward.



Jupiter, with its 12-year orbit, and Saturn with a 29.5-year orbit, always appear to move slowly through the night sky—but as the Earth is overtaking them, they appear to slow down even more. What makes the events of 7 B.C.E. so unusual, astronomically speaking, is that the Earth overtook both Jupiter and Saturn at the same time, when they were in conjunction. It's very rare for these two planets to come into conjunction at all—it only happens once every 20 years—and it's even less common for this to happen when they are in opposition and the Earth is passing them, making them both go into apparent retrograde motion at about the same time.



This meant that in 7 B.C.E., the two slowest planets lingered for a long time—11 months—together in the same small corner of the sky (in Pisces). While in Pisces, they came into conjunction—passed especially close to each other in the sky—three different times.

The diagram (above) depicts the similar, looping paths these planets took that year starting in the west (at right) and moving, at first, in an easterly direction (to the left). The Babylonian year began in the month of Nisan (our April). Saturn first appeared on about the third of Nisan (April 4 in the drawing), and moved slowly eastward from night to night. Jupiter appeared a few weeks later, on April 24. Jupiter was moving more quickly in its smaller orbit and caught up to Saturn on May 27—the date of the first conjunction.

For the next couple months, both planets appeared to travel in the typical easterly direction, but Earth was gaining fast. As the Earth began to overtake Saturn, Saturn appeared to slow its eastward advance, stop and then switch direction on July 6. Jupiter did the same thing when Earth passed by it: On July 16 it appeared to stop and change direction. Now both planets appeared to move from east to west across the sky, with Saturn in the lead once again. On October 6, 7 B.C.E., at 10 p.m., Jupiter caught up with Saturn. This was the second conjunction of the year, made even more striking by the full moon that shone nearby that evening.

The planets continued to travel west until November. As the Earth moved farther ahead, the planets appeared to pause for a second time: Jupiter on November 7, Saturn on November 20. They then appeared once again to travel in their usual, easterly direction. Saturn again was in the lead, but Jupiter quickly caught up. On December 1, at 9 p.m., the two planets came into conjunction for the third and final time that year. It would be another 20 years before they would meet again, another 200 years before they met in Pisces and another 800 years before they would meet in a triple conjunction.

This article first appeared in Bible Review *magazine, December 2001. You can view this article fully illustrated in the BAS Library, along with more than 30 years of articles by the world's foremost scholars of Biblical archaeology and related fields.*

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What Was the Star that Guided the Magi?

By Dale C. Allison, Jr.



Metropolitan Museum of Art Bequest of Maitland P. Griggs, 1943 (43.99.1)

The journey of the Magi. The star guiding the haloed kings to Bethlehem in this 15th-century painting by the Sienese artist Sassetta hovers strangely, in the foreground. Even a flock of geese, spanning the blue sky, flies higher than the luminous star. According to Matthew 2:9, the star "went before them [the magi] till it came to rest over the place where the child was." Modern astronomy cannot corroborate this story—but an understanding of ancient interpretations of stars can.

Near the time of Jesus' birth, "wise men from the east" appeared in Jerusalem inquiring, "Where is he who has been king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and have come to worship him" (Matthew 2:1–2). What exactly was this star?

Matthew tells us that it "went before" the magi, and that "it came to rest over the place where the child was" (Matthew 2:9). This is surely strange behavior for a star.

Over the centuries commentators have suggested that this star was a planetary conjunction, a comet or a supernova, a so-called new star.[1]

Grave difficulties beset each of these proposals, however. True, comets do traverse the sky, and supernovas and planetary conjunctions, because of the earth's motion, at least appear to move. But that a lighted object high in the sky above could guide someone on the earth below to a precise location simply makes no sense. St. John Chrysostom, the famous Antiochean preacher of the fourth century, long ago recognized the difficulty and proposed a solution:

> "Bethlehem's star did not remaining on high point out the place, it not being possible for them [the magi] so to ascertain it; instead it came down and performed this office. For you know that a spot of such small dimensions, being only as much as a shed would occupy, or rather as much as the body of a little infant would take up, could not possibly be marked out by a star. For by reasons of its immense height, it could not sufficiently distinguish so confined a spot."[2]

The same nation, that the star actually left its heavenly abode and descended to earth, and there-upon traveled to the infant Jesus, appears in the Protevangelium of James (21.3), an important second-century infancy narrative.

"And the wise men went forth. And behold, the star which they had seen in the east went before them, until they came to the cave. And it stood over the head of the child."

But there are problems here too, Aside from meteors, heavenly objects obviously do not leave their orbits and descend to earth. Were a true star indeed to approach our planet, we would all soon perish in an inferno. We may be grateful that the stars are so far away and keep to their courses.

What then are we to make of Bethlehem's star, whose behavior is so at odds with current knowledge? The answer lies in how the ancients understood stars—which was not at all as we do. Quite simply, Chrysostom's idea of a star was not our idea of a star. Neither he nor the author of the Gospel of Matthew imagined stars to be immense, inanimate, energetic masses millions of light-years away from, and thousands of times larger than, our planet.

In antiquity, stars were widely thought to be living beings, and this is the clue to a correct understanding of Matthew's text. A belief that the stars are alive belongs to worldwide folklore and indeed lies behind the common phenomenon of star worship. Greek myths depict divinities (Venus, for example) and heroes and heroines (such as Hercules and Andromeda) as stars. The Zoroastrian Pahlavi texts from ancient Iran equate the *fravasûis* (the eternal spirits of humanity) with heavenly bodies. The Egyptians identified the dead pharaoh with the Pole Star. Oceanic

mythology regards the stars as children of the sun (female) and the moon (male). I could easily go on in this vein.

Jewish tradition also shared this view. The first-century Jewish Alexandrian philosopher Philo took it for granted, as did Plato and the Stoics before him, that the stars were living beings.[3] The stars, Philo wrote, “are living creatures, but of a kind composed entirely of mind.”[4] God, he said,

> “set land-animals on the earth, aquatic creatures in the seas and rivers, and in heaven the stars, each of which is said to be not a living creature only but mind of the purest kind through and through; and therefore in air also, the remaining section of the universe, living creatures exist.”[5]

Although Philo represents a rather refined, philosophical Judaism, his conviction about the stars was, from very ancient times, a commonplace of Jewish thought. Already in Judges 5:20 we read: “From heaven fought the stars, from their courses they fought against Sisera.” The commentators inform us that this is more than oriental poetry and rhetoric: The text envisages the involvement of the stars, the cosmic forces of heaven, in Israel’s great victory.[6]

Similarly in Job 38:7 we read of a time “when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted together.” These two lines are in synonymous parallelism: The stars are the Sons of God, that is, the heavenly hosts. This idea—that the stars are angels—is either stated or implicit in dozens of texts.[7]

It is also important for my purposes that angels commonly served as guides in ancient literature. For example, Exodus 14:19, which recounts how the children of Israel were led out of Egypt, reads:

“Then the angel of God went before the host of Israel, moved from before them and stood behind them.” Exodus 23:20 explains: “Behold, I send an angel before you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place which I have prepared.” This declaration, that Israel had an angelic guide, is then repeated in Exodus 23:23, 32:34 and 33:2.



Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Edward Fowles, 1971

Trailed by a glowing nebula, this intent angel, painted in fresco by an unknown Italian artist, descends from the heavens and shines brilliantly against the midnight-blue sky. In antiquity, people considered stars living beings and often identified them with angels, and, in ancient literature, angels commonly acted as guides. Author Allison proposes that the star that led the magi to Bethlehem was a similar manifestation to the angel that led the children of Israel out of Egypt.

A very strange book, of uncertain date and origin, known as the History of the Rechabites, makes the same point. At the beginning of this document—which is Christian in its present form but may incorporate a Jewish source—God sends an angel to the pious Zosimus to guide him on his trek to find the island of the blessed Rechabites. This island turns out to be much like heaven. One is inevitably reminded of how often angels in apocalyptic literature appear as tour guides: They conduct seers to otherworldly places and reveal divine secrets.[8]

Angels are not only guides. They are also, like stars, bright. For example, the angel at Jesus' tomb has the appearance of lightning (Matthew 28:3). Paul writes that Satan can disguise himself as "an angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14). The extracanonical Life of Adam and Eve explains that Satan, in order to deceive Eve, made himself appear as an angel, and specifically like "the brightness of angels." The pseudepigraphical Testament of Job tells us that a "light" conversed with Job and goes on to explain that this light was an angel.[9] The Dead Sea Scrolls refer to the archangel Michael as "the Prince of Lights."[10] Finally, the meaning of Acts 6:15, when it states that Stephen's face "was like the face of an angel," is patent: It shone.

Angels also regularly descend from heaven to earth. The story of the angels and Jacob's ladder in Genesis 28:10–17 comes immediately to mind, as does the passage in 3 Maccabees 6:16–29, where God opens "heaven's gates" to send forth two angels of glorious appearance,

who thereupon confound the persecutors of the righteous Jews. In Revelation the seer speaks as follows: “And I saw an angel come down from heaven” (Revelation 18:1, 20:1). With this we may compare the first-century C.E. Jewish-Egyptian romance Joseph and Aseneth. There an angelic star comes down from heaven:

> “And when Aseneth had ceased making confession to the Lord, behold, the morning star rose out of heaven in the east. And Aseneth saw it and rejoiced and said, ‘So the Lord God listened to my prayer, because this star rose as a messenger [Greek: *aggelos*] and herald of the light of the great day.’ And Aseneth kept looking, and behold, close to the morning star, the heaven was torn apart and great and unutterable light appeared. And Aseneth saw it and fell on her face on the ashes. And a man came to her from heaven and stood by Aseneth’s head. And he called her and said, ‘Aseneth, Aseneth.’ And she said, ‘Who is he that calls me, because the door of my chamber is closed, and the tower is high, and how then did he come into my chamber?’ And the man called her a second time and said, ‘Aseneth, Aseneth.’ And she said, ‘Behold, here I am, Lord. Who are you, tell me.’ And the man said, ‘I am the chief of the house of the Lord and commander of the whole host of the Most High.’”[11]

The legend of Satan and his angels was also commonly represented as the falling of stars from heaven. As Revelation 12:4 has it, the devil, in the guise of a red dragon, “swept down a third of the stars of heaven, and cast them to the earth.”[12]

We may now return to Bethlehem’s star in the Gospel of Matthew. Today we know that astronomical objects do not go before people to guide them on their way. Nor can they come to rest over a person, a house or a city. Nor do they leave heaven and come down to earth. But in old Jewish and Christian tradition, angels, who are identified with stars, can do these things and in fact often do them.

In short, I believe we should identify the star in Matthew 2 as an angel. To put the matter somewhat differently, the star that went before the magi in Matthew was akin to the angel that went before Israel in Exodus as he fled pharaoh’s armies.

As support for my reading of Matthew, I can cite an old and little-studied apocryphal gospel, the so-called Arabic Gospel of the Infancy. This relates, in chapter 7, the following story:

"And it came to pass, when the Lord Jesus was born at Bethlehem of Judaea, in the time of King Herod, behold, magi came from the east. … And there were with them gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And they adored him [Jesus], and presented the gifts to him. … In the same hour there appeared to them an angel in the form of that star which had before guided them on their journey; and went away, following the guidance of its light, until they arrived in their own country."

This, I believe, only makes explicit what is implicit in Matthew, namely, that the guiding star was a guiding angel.

I must confess that the interpretation found in the Arabic Gospel of the Infancy is not the dominant interpretation in Christian exegetical history. Most ancient commentators have assumed that Bethlehem's star was an inanimate celestial phenomenon. But I think I can explain the reason for this. It has to do with Origen, the great but controversial church father of the third century. Origen agreed with the Greek philosophers that the heavenly bodies are alive and have souls. Indeed, he spent much time discoursing on the subject.[13] His theology also allowed for both universalism—everyone will make it to heaven—and the transmigration of souls, which aroused so much opposition in the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries that he was officially declared a heretic by the orthodox church. This condemnation of Origen's teaching, combined with a desire to obliterate all traces of polytheism from Christian theology and a need to eliminate any basis for astrology, led the great church father Jerome, the emperor Justinian and other prominent Christians to argue that the stars are not alive.[14] In the end they prevailed. As the Second Council of Constantinople (553 C.E.) put it: If anyone shall say that the heaven, the sun, the moon, the stars … have souls, and are reasonable beings, let him be anathema." Thus the idea that the heavenly bodies are animate ceased to be an option for Christian theology; and with that the identification of Bethlehem's star with an angel exited the house of exegetical options.

I conclude with two observations: First, it may well be that any investigation of what modern astronomy might tell us about Bethlehem's star amounts to a search for what was never there.

Second, nothing said here should prejudice one's answer to the inevitable question, what, if anything, really happened? Did wise men from the east follow a light—be it star or angel—to Bethlehem and so discover Jesus? Or is Matthew's story to be considered an haggadic-type legend whose meaning is to be found elsewhere than in its correspondence to historical facts? Those disinclined to believe that wise foreigners trailed a heavenly portent to

Judea will, obviously, be no more inclined to credit the report of an angelic guide. On the other hand, those accustomed to believing that the creator arranged a conjunction, supernova or comet to coincide with Jesus' birth should have no trouble accepting that the same creator directed the magi to the Messiah through the instrument of an angel. The issue of interpretation is not the issue of historicity. This I leave to the reader.

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Where Was Jesus Born?

Introduction

Psst.There's something you should know about Christmas. The Christmas carols, we're afraid, might have it wrong: Jesus, many New Testament scholars believe, was not born in Bethlehem but Nazareth.

Among scholars this view is no secret. But for some reason, the story is not often recounted outside the ivy-covered walls. Which is why we asked two experts to go public and explain both sides of the issue. We invited Steve Mason of Toronto's York University to lay out the little-known but more widely accepted (there's an oxymoron for you!) view that Jesus was born in Nazareth. Mason offers a fascinating lesson of the way scholars search for history in the biblical text in "O Little Town of … Nazareth?".

Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, of the École Biblique et Archéologique Française in Jerusalem, takes a different tack in "Bethlehem … Of Course," delving into the archaeological, extrabiblical and gospel evidence in support of the long-cherished Bethlehem tradition.

In the end, we leave you to fill in the blank: "O little town of ________."

Where Was Jesus Born?

O Little Town of … Nazareth?

By Steve Mason



Musee des Beaux-Arts, Dijon, France/Explorer, Paris/Superstock

Shielded by a hazy mist, Joseph and Mary escape to Egypt with their newborn son, in an etching by French artist François Millet (1814–1875).

Where was Jesus born? In Bethlehem, of course, in a manger, because there was no room for Joseph and Mary at the local inn. That's what all the Christmas carols say. And that's what the Gospels say, too.

Or is it?

Once we begin to examine the gospel stories carefully, we find that the answer to this simple question is not so, well, simple. Passages in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke that describe Jesus' birth in Bethlehem have been seamlessly woven together in modern-day Christmas pageants, but the Gospels of Mark and John leave the reader with the distinct impression that Jesus was born not in Bethlehem after all, but in Nazareth.

For the historian, these inconsistencies pose a challenge.[1]

The historian is a time detective, whose task is to raise a specific question about the past, to determine whether there is sufficient evidence to support a probable solution, and finally, to demonstrate how such a solution explains the evidence. Whichever hypothesis most adequately explains the variety of independent evidence becomes a “historical fact”—at least until a better hypothesis comes along.

Applying historical analysis to the earliest Christian writings, most of which are in the New Testament, is not a casual exercise. These are not only the most familiar documents from Western antiquity; they are also revered as scripture by millions of Christians around the globe. Interpreters tend either to overlook ordinary historical questions when reading them or, in some cases, to overcompensate by an unusually aggressive dismissal of their claims. Nevertheless, if the “history” of Christian origins is to mean anything, we should not simply abandon ourselves to inherited traditions; we should not switch off our normal thought processes when we contemplate Christian beginnings. Instead, we must strive to analyze these texts with the same discipline we use in reconstructing the past behind the narratives of ancient historians such as Livy, Josephus and Tacitus. I realize that some readers consider it inappropriate to apply common historical principles to these texts, and I respect that position. Obviously, I take a different view, which is why I would like to address the question of Jesus’ birthplace.[2]

To try to establish where Jesus was born, the historian must examine all the relevant evidence—whether material artifacts, such as coins, pottery and stone inscriptions, or ancient literature, such as the Gospels, the letters of Paul and the Roman histories and other extrabiblical texts.

In our study of Jesus’ birthplace, we can review the archaeological evidence quickly, because there is none: We have no material remains bearing on Jesus’ birthplace. The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, for example, was not built because of any local memory of Jesus’ birth there; it is a much later memorial, constructed on the site of a fourth-century church erected by the emperor Constantine when Christianity received state recognition. Constantine probably selected the spot based on the then-famous stories recorded in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

That leaves us with the texts.

Not one of the first- and early-second-century A.D. non-Christian authors who mention Christians in passing—the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, the Romans Tacitus and Pliny—

provides us with any helpful information about Jesus' birthplace. We have only the earliest Christian texts, written by the first three generations of Jesus' followers, from the time of Jesus' death in about 30 A.D. to roughly 150 A.D. These writings—and only these writings—are the sources we must examine.

The only texts that are dated with some confidence to the first Christian generation (about 30 to 65 A.D.) are the New Testament letters genuinely attributed to Paul. From the second generation, we have the four canonical Gospels. The Gospels are generally dated to between 65 and 100 A.D., with Mark being the earliest and Matthew and Luke dating to the end of that period. John may fall almost anywhere within this range.[3] But what did these writers really know about Jesus' birthplace? And what motivated them to speak of Jesus' birth at all?

Let's begin with our earliest source, Paul.

In all of the letters that we have, Paul never mentions any geographical location in connection with Jesus.

This absence can be explained in several ways: Such references may have been irrelevant to his purposes; or he may have assumed that his (converted) readers already knew of these traditions and therefore that he didn't need to mention them; or he may not have known much about the geography of Jesus' life. Admittedly, much can be attributed to the first category (irrelevance), since Paul was primarily concerned with Jesus' status between his crucifixion and his return from heaven, and not so much with the mundane details of Jesus' life. When he referred to Jesus' betrayal and described the Last Supper (1 Corinthians 11:23), for example, he almost certainly knew that these events took place near Jerusalem, but he had no reason to bring it up.

Did Paul know any tradition about the place of Jesus' birth? Since he does not mention one, we cannot be certain. But there is another way to approach this question, which is to ask whether it would have helped Paul's arguments—or those of his correspondents—to mention Jesus' birthplace if he did know about it.

Paul wrote letters, not essays, and he was in frequent debate with other Christians whose views differed from his own. His letters preserve not only his own perspectives, therefore, but also traces of his correspondents'. For example, many of Paul's gentile converts were attracted by Judaism; some of the males were even willing to undergo circumcision (Galatians 4:21, 5:2–12). So Paul discussed circumcision at several points, even though he probably would not have raised the subject if he were simply presenting his own views. So, we can ask not only whether Jesus'

birthplace was an issue for Paul, but whether his letters indicate that it was an issue for any first-generation Christians.

Paul mentions Jesus' ancestry only twice, and then incidentally. The first time, he is writing to some gentile converts in Galatia, trying to discourage them from their zeal to adopt Judaism. Just as Jesus, though he had been born "under the law" and "of a woman," achieved spiritual sonship and freedom from the law (Galatians 4:4), so also the Galatians, who have achieved spiritual sonship, must not regress by enslaving themselves to a physical regimen (as Paul characterizes the Jewish calendar and circumcision).

The second time Paul mentions Jesus' birth, he is addressing converts in Rome. In this context, he concedes to his readers Jesus' physical ancestry from David, but he highlights Jesus' designation as "Son of God" for all humanity (Romans 1:4).

Scholars differ significantly in their understanding of Paul's motives,[a] but I would argue that even if he had known of the Bethlehem tradition, it would not have served his interests to mention it. Among his gentile converts, attraction to Judaism was an ongoing phenomenon. Paul's consistent line was to draw them back to the "new creation" that he believed had supplanted Judaism (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15). A birth in Bethlehem, King David's home, would naturally cement Jesus' Jewish-messianic affiliation,[4] which Paul was trying to move beyond. Thus it is not surprising that Paul might not have mentioned Jesus' birth in Bethlehem even if he knew about it, for mentioning Bethlehem would only have given fuel to his Jewish Christian opponents. First, in Romans 1:3, Paul does concede Jesus' Davidic descent: Although he was son of David "according to the flesh" (a negative category for Paul), he became son of God (much grander, no?) by his resurrection from the dead—from the physical to the spiritual. Second, although someone else might argue that Davidic ancestry would increase Jesus' appeal for Paul and his readers, I cannot see that. Paul is in a dire struggle with the Jewish Christians precisely because he has been preaching to gentiles a dying and rising savior—Jesus denuded of Jewish connections. It would only help his opponents to emphasize Jesus' Davidic ancestry. For Paul, that is more or less irrelevant: Jesus is the son of God, for all nations alike, without any special Jewish connection. Judaism has, for Paul, ended.

More telling, perhaps, is that Paul's correspondents did not seize upon Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, if they had known about it, as evidence of the Jewish nature of Jesus. From Paul's letters, we know that his correspondents quoted copiously from Jewish scripture (including the terms of the covenant with Abraham and Moses) and that they appealed to the examples of Jesus' own brothers and students, who no doubt spoke of Jesus' Jewish practices (2 Corinthians

11:5–29; Galatians 1:6–11, 2:11–21, 3:6–21). They marshaled arguments for Jesus' Jewish context, and Paul was forced to reply to them in some detail. But as far as we can tell, the circumstances of Jesus' birth never came up. If Jesus was known to have had a miraculous birth in the auspicious village of Bethlehem, wouldn't someone in this first generation have made some sort of appeal to it? Yet, in the end, we are left with complete silence about Jesus' birthplace from the time of Jesus' death to about 65 A.D. The Gospels are at least a generation removed from Jesus' birth. It is extremely unlikely that any of these authors was an eyewitness to Jesus' life. They all relied on oral and written sources. Indeed, the author of Luke freely admits at the outset that the events he describes "were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses" (Luke 1:2). The Fourth Gospel concludes with a similar disclosure (John 21:24).[5] Further, all four Gospels are anonymous texts. The familiar attributions of the Gospels to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John come from the mid-second century and later, and we have no good historical reason to accept these attributions.

Although we cannot identify the authors or the precise dates of the Gospels, we can say something about the literary relationship of the first three Gospels (the Synoptic Gospels).[b] The dominant hypothesis today is that Mark served as a source for both Matthew and Luke and that the extensive material common to Matthew and Luke but not paralleled in Mark comes from another shared source (called Q for convenience), which is now lost.[c] I make no use of Q here, though I do assume for argument's sake that Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source.[6]

Did the author of Mark, the earliest of the four Gospels, know anything about the place of Jesus' birth?



Scala/Art Resource, NY

Jesus emerges from Nazareth a grown man in Georges Rouault's 1948 oil painting, just as in the Gospel of Mark, which makes no mention of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem or of his childhood. Mark consistently refers to Jesus as "Jesus of Nazareth." The evangelist's motivation is difficult to determine: Did Mark simply not know of the Bethlehem tradition, or did he wish to conceal the story in order to distance Jesus from Jewish traditions of a Messiah from Bethlehem, the home of King David?

Unlike Luke and Matthew, which include the familiar birth stories, Mark opens with Jesus as an adult, who simply emerges from Nazareth: “In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan” (Mark 1:9). When Jesus moves to Capernaum, everyone continues to address him as a Nazarene. “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” ask the locals in the Capernaum synagogue (Mark 1:24; see also 10:47, 14:67, 16:6). When Jesus returns to his “hometown” (Greek *patris*, “ancestral home”), he goes to Nazareth (Mark 6:1). When he teaches in the Nazareth synagogue, the locals are offended at his pretensions because they have long known him, his mother, his brothers and his sisters (Mark 6:1–3). Although the author does not say “since birth,” that seems to be assumed. Jesus responds famously: “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, among their own kin, and in their own home” (Mark 6:4).

The author of Mark is not simply silent about Bethlehem; he appears to assume that Jesus was born and raised in Nazareth. Anyone who read Mark alone, without benefit of Matthew or Luke (which Mark’s first readers would not have known), would receive that impression. Mark makes no effort to explain any other origin. But does this mean that Mark knows nothing of a Bethlehem birth? Or might Mark, like Paul, have had strong motives to deny any connection between Jesus and that town?

Mark’s story is very much in the tradition of Paul’s: The Gospel portrays Jesus as the dying and rising savior, who will return shortly to save his followers, represented by all nations. In Mark, Jesus is fundamentally, indeed fatally, alienated from Judaism. “What is this? A new teaching!” his Jewish listeners gasp (Mark 1:27). Jesus’ Jewish family, students and hometown folk are major disappointments to him because they do not understand him. Later in Mark, it is the Pharisees (members of a Jewish sect) who will conspire with Herod to murder Jesus (Mark 3:6). Even if the author of Mark had known about a Bethlehem birth, he, like Paul, may have had reason to suppress that information in order to disassociate Jesus from Jewish categories.

In keeping with this dislocation from Judaism, Mark’s Jesus directly challenges the notion that the Messiah should be a descendant of David: “While Jesus was teaching in the Temple, he said, ‘How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David?…David himself calls him Lord; so how can he be his [David’s] son?’” (Mark 12:35–37). If Davidic descent itself is unimportant in Mark, birth in David’s hometown is irrelevant.

On the other hand, at least one passage in Mark indicates that the author, rather than trying to hide the traditions surrounding Jesus’ birth, truly did not know about them: Once, when Jesus returns home and a crowd gathers around him, his family and friends go out to seize him,

thinking that he is "out of his mind" because of his behavior (Mark 3:21). If the author of Mark (or his Christian readers) had known about the heavenly revelations to Mary and Joseph, about the shepherds and the Magi, and about the great celebration at the time of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, would he not have mentioned this?

Although both Matthew and Luke appear to have drawn on Mark, these later Gospels often disagree significantly with their source. The authors of Matthew and Luke were especially concerned with re-establishing Jesus within Judaism to some degree. And the story that they had heard about Jesus' birth in Bethlehem helped them do so.

Matthew's intentions are clear from his opening lines, which firmly establish Jesus' Jewish roots: "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham." Matthew goes on to list the generations from Abraham to Jesus—including 14 from Abraham to David, 14 from David to the Exile and a final 14 from the Exile to Jesus. Only then does Matthew describe the birth: "Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:18). An angel encourages Joseph not to abandon Mary:

> "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet [quoting Isaiah 7:14[d]]: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.
>
> Matthew 1:20–25

Only then are we given the time and location of the birth: "In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?'"



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"Fear not," an angel reassures the sleeping Joseph, carved in ivory on this late-11th-century plaque from southern Italy, now in the Victoria & Albert Museum. Three times in the Gospel of Matthew an angel appears to Joseph—instructing him to take Mary as his wife, warning him to flee to Egypt with his family and finally telling him when it is safe to return to Israel (Matthew 1:20–23, 13–15, 19–20).

Frightened, Herod calls together his chief priests and scribes and asks them where the Messiah was to be born. Quoting the prophet Micah (see the first sidebar to this article), they reply: "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel'" (Matthew 2:5–6).

In Matthew's account, Jesus' parents initially live in Bethlehem, just south of Jerusalem (Matthew 2:1, 11). It is only when a paranoid King Herod massacres the newborns in that region (Matthew 2:16) that the family flees to Egypt. Although the new parents wish to return home to

Bethlehem in Judea after Herod's death, they receive divine instruction to settle in "a town called Nazareth" (Matthew 2:23), which is introduced at the end of Matthew's birth narrative. Each of the family's movements, the author repeatedly points out, "fulfills what was spoken through the prophet" (Matthew 1:22, 2:5, 15, 17, 23), quoting Isaiah, Micah and perhaps other prophets. Clearly, Matthew wants to show that Jesus stood in continuity with his Jewish past.

Matthew's allusions to Micah and other prophets raise a crucial question: Is it more likely that the author included a Bethlehem birth for Jesus because he knew that this had in fact happened or because he knew of the passages in scripture and thought it important to describe Jesus' career in the language of the prophets? This may seem cynical, but it is an unavoidable issue for the historian. Later in Matthew, we find the author clearly adjusting the story of Jesus' life to match the Old Testament record. For example, in Mark, when Jesus enters Jerusalem, he rides on a donkey colt (Mark 11:2). The author of Matthew parallels Mark's story almost verbatim, except that he has Jesus riding on both a donkey and its colt (Matthew 21:2, 7). The author explains that this action fulfills Zechariah 9:9, according to which the king of Israel should come riding on a donkey and a colt (Matthew 21:4–5).[e]

Has the author of Matthew similarly manipulated the birth account?

Matthew's infancy narrative can be suspiciously formulaic, beginning with the neat division of Jesus' genealogy into three sets of 14 generations, which do not accord with the Old Testament parallels or even with the text of Matthew itself.[7] Such patterns suggest that the author is not simply reporting on events.[8]

Further, despite Matthew's efforts to construct neat literary patterns, the Bethlehem story is not well incorporated into the rest of the text. Immediately following the birth narrative, Matthew appears to revert to Mark's version of events. In chapters 3 to 28 of Matthew, which paraphrase Mark extensively, Jesus speaks of Nazareth as his ancestral home or birthplace (Matthew 13:57) and Jesus is said to be "from Nazareth" (Matthew 21:11, 26:71). Joseph, a central figure in the birth narrative, disappears entirely (in keeping with Mark, which never mentions Joseph), and the birth story is nowhere recalled in later chapters of Matthew. Curiously, Matthew even preserves Jesus' challenge to the Messiah's descent from David (Matthew 22:41–45).

Finally, there are obvious historical difficulties with Matthew's birth narrative, including the mysterious star that somehow identified a particular house in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:9–11) and Herod's slaughter of children—an event that is not recorded in any other first-century A.D. source. Matthew's contemporary Josephus wrote several volumes excoriating Herod for his violations of

Jewish custom.[9] It seems highly unlikely that if a slaughter of babies had taken place near Jerusalem, Josephus would not have heard about it and used it as an example of Herod's heinous crimes.

The most serious doubts about the historicity of Matthew's Bethlehem story, however, come to light as we compare his text with Luke's.

Luke's Bethlehem story is not complementary to Matthew's, filling in the gaps, as is often assumed. Rather, it is an irreconcilably different account from beginning to end: in story line, supporting characters, geographical and historical detail, and style. Both accounts explain that Jesus was born to the Virgin Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem and grew up in Nazareth, but that is all they share.

The Gospel of Luke opens with two birth narratives—John the Baptist's and Jesus'—claiming that the two men were relatives (Luke 1:5–2:21, esp. 1:36–45). We first read of how John's elderly parents, late in life, will give birth to a son; then we read of the annunciation to Mary. Next we're told the circumstances of the birth and infancy of John and then of Jesus.



Scala/Art Resource, NY

"And she brought forth her firstborn son, and laid him in a manger." So wrote Luke in his remarkable birth story, set here in a fanciful Italianate landscape. Commissioned to hang in the Church of the Holy Trinity in Florence, "The Adoration of the Shepherds" (1485) by Domenico Ghirlandaio includes the manger where Mary and Joseph were forced to spend the night because there was "no room at the inn" (Luke 2:7). On a distant hill, an angel announces the miraculous birth to the shepherds "keeping watch over their flock by night" (Luke 2:8–14). In the foreground, these shepherds, their skin tanned by years in the fields, marvel at the newborn child (2:16–18) while the gray-haired Joseph casts his eyes toward heaven.

Luke's account of Jesus' birth opens with Mary and Joseph living in Nazareth (not Bethlehem, as Matthew has it). Near the end of Mary's pregnancy, during the rule of the emperor Augustus and the Syrian governor Quirinius, the couple must travel to Bethlehem for a worldwide census (never mentioned in Matthew), which requires people to return to their ancestral homes (Luke 2:1–5). Joseph goes to Bethlehem because he belongs to the "house and ancestry" (*oikos kai patria*) of King David, who lived a millennium earlier. Jesus is born just after his parents arrive in Bethlehem. There is no room for them at the inn, so he is born in the local manger (Luke 2:7), where he is adored by the local shepherds. Once Mary's 33 days of purification are over (Luke 2:22; cf. Leviticus 12:4), she presents Jesus in the Temple with an appropriate sacrifice; then she and Joseph return home to Nazareth (Luke 2:39; in Matthew, they only settle in Nazareth after traveling to Egypt).

The author of Luke, like the author of Matthew, wishes to establish Jesus within Judaism.[10] Does he mention Bethlehem simply to strengthen his argument?[11]

Just as Matthew's account presents historical problems, so does Luke's. The census, mentioned only by Luke, provides the historical context for Luke's birth narrative. We do have outside corroboration of a census of the Jews under the Syrian governor Quirinius, when Judea was directly annexed to Rome as a province: This census plays a significant role in the histories of Josephus because it reportedly sparked a popular revolt.[12]

Luke's effort to link Jesus' birth in Bethlehem with the census is, however, plagued by historical inconsistencies and improbabilities.[13] The census described by Josephus occurred in 6 A.D., several years after Jesus' birth (see the second sidebar to this article). It was not a worldwide census, although it apparently included Syria along with Judea. And requiring people to travel far away from where they were living would defeat the purpose of a Roman census, which was to assess current property for taxation. Moreover, only the household head would need to report to a local administrative center. Finally, it would be absurd to require all the thousands of descendants of David, who had lived a thousand years earlier, to return to his birthplace. David himself moved to Jerusalem after conquering the city, and so a descendant of David would also be a descendant of many others—from Jerusalem.

These are not the only problems with Luke's narrative: Following the initial account of Jesus' birth in Luke, the remarkable Bethlehem story plays no further role (just as in Matthew). Significantly, the author describes Nazareth as "the place where Jesus was raised" (Luke 4:16) rather than as Jesus' native town (cf. Mark 6:1), but Jesus continues to be identified as "Jesus of Nazareth" or "the Nazarene" (Luke 4:34, 18:37, 24:19; Acts 2:22, 3:6, 4:10, 6:14 et al.). Further,

when Jesus comes to trial, Luke—alone—insists that because he was a Galilean by origin, Jesus had to be tried by Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee who was visiting Jerusalem for Passover (Luke 23:6–7). There is no remembrance of Bethlehem as Jesus' ancestral home.[14]

The Gospel of John offers no account of Jesus' birth, but the text nevertheless reveals many early Christian assumptions regarding Jesus' birthplace.

Most tellingly, in John 7:40–44 a crowd is debating whether Jesus is a prophet or the Messiah; some of the people object, saying: "The Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he? Didn't the scripture say that the Messiah comes from the seed of David, from Bethlehem—the village where David was from?" No one says, "Wait a minute. Jesus was indeed born in Bethlehem!" The author of John does not seem to know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

Similarly, when the disciple Nathanael is told that Jesus is the one described in the Law and Prophets and comes "from Nazareth," Nathanael retorts, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" (John 1:45–46).

The contrast between what Jesus appears to be (human) and what he really is (divine) is a theme found throughout the Gospel: Similarly, Jesus appears to die miserably, as any man would, when hoisted on the cross, whereas in reality the cross marks his exaltation and the completion of his mission (John 12:32, 19:30). It fits with John's entire approach, therefore, to use Jesus' humble birth in Nazareth as a counterpoint to his heavenly origin.

Let us return to our "simple" question: Where was Jesus born? Does any hypothesis concerning Jesus' birthplace explain the evidence?

If Jesus was born in Bethlehem and this was widely known among his followers, then Jesus' distinguished place of birth must have been regarded as irrelevant to any early Christian discussion that has left traces in Paul's letters. This would be surprising, though not entirely improbable.

Similarly, the author of Mark might have suppressed this information, while at the same time implying that Jesus was from Nazareth, out of a desire to separate Jesus from Jewish traditions.

The author of John, too, may have concealed the Bethlehem tradition; this, however, is more difficult to explain, because if it was widely known that Jesus was from Bethlehem, that

knowledge would have undercut the author's use of irony based on Jesus' ignominious origins as a Galilean and, more specifically, a Nazarene.

Even harder to explain are the extensive disagreements and numerous historical improbabilities in the only two texts that posit a Bethlehem birth: Matthew and Luke. Neither narrative indicates that its author knew the circumstances of Jesus' birth.

Finally, if Jesus' birth in Davidic Bethlehem was widely known among early Christians, why didn't this knowledge have a greater effect on the thinking of the first four generations of Christians, who were most exercised to prove Jesus' messiahship to doubting Jews?

If the Bethlehem hypothesis does not explain the evidence very well, would another site, such as Nazareth, work better? Perhaps, but our survey of the evidence suggests that early Christians simply did not know much about Jesus' birth. This is only to be expected, since Jesus' main significance for many of his earliest followers had to do with his teaching, death, resurrection and expected return. When Jesus began his ministry as an adult, he was known to his followers as "Jesus of Nazareth"—a title that persists in all the second-generation texts. Christians throughout the first generation reasonably assumed, as did the later authors of Mark and John, that Jesus was born and raised in Nazareth. It was fairly late when some Christians first became more interested in the question, and this accords with a demonstrable tendency in later Christian history to cultivate information about Jesus' birth and early years. Even by the time of Matthew and Luke, reliable information about Jesus' birth was no longer available. These authors took the basic proposition (probably from an earlier, now-lost source) that Jesus, the son of David, had been born in Bethlehem before Joseph and Mary had become intimate. This proposition could easily have originated in reflection upon Micah 5:2 and developed from there. That would explain why their stories fit their respective literary proclivities so well. It was only in the mid-second century, after their accounts were in wide circulation, that Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, the city of David, would capture the Christian imagination. Only then did the Bethlehem birth become a significant argument for Jesus' messiahship and the evolving doctrine of the incarnation—of God becoming man.

Where was Jesus born? Was it Bethlehem or Nazareth or even Sepphoris, Tiberias or Jerusalem? We cannot know for sure because the early Christians themselves apparently did not know.

Bethlehem in the Bible

Sidebar to: O Little Town of … Nazareth?

If the gospel writers were drawing on Old Testament references to Bethlehem to bolster Jesus' identification as the Messiah, they certainly had plenty of passages to choose from. Bethlehem (the name means "House of Bread") appears almost 50 times in more than ten books of the Hebrew Bible.

The city, just 5 miles south of Jerusalem, is first mentioned in conjunction with the death of the matriarch Rachel. "So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem)" (Genesis 35:19, 48:7).[a]

More important to our story, Bethlehem is also where Ruth and Boaz meet, marry and bear their son Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of King David. God sends the prophet Samuel to Bethlehem to find the new king, saying, "I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided myself a king among his sons" (1 Samuel 16:1). Bethlehem remained a city of significance throughout the stories of David's life and reign; while fighting the Philistines, who had a garrison at Bethlehem, David requests water from the well of Bethlehem (2 Samuel 23:15).

And there's more. The Book of Micah, written around the time of the Assyrian siege of Samaria in the late eighth century B.C., looks forward to a new day when Israel will be led by a ruler from Bethlehem (perhaps a ruler "from David's line"):

> But you Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
> the least of the clans of Judah,
> from you will come for me
> a future ruler of Israel
> whose origins go back to the distant past,
> to the days of old.
> Hence Yahweh will abandon them
> only until she who is in labor gives birth,
> and then those who survive of his race will be reunited to the Israelites.
> He will take his stand and he will shepherd them
> with the power of Yahweh,
> with the majesty of the name of his God,
> and they will be secure, for his greatness will

extend henceforth to the mose distant parts of the country.
He himself will be peace!

Micah 5:1–4

It is this prophecy of Micah that will be quoted by Matthew as evidence of Jesus' messiahship.

The next (and last) references to Bethlehem in the Hebrew Bible record how many of the city's residents returned from the Babylonian Exile: 123, according to Ezra 2:21 (see also Nehemiah 7:26).

Following the birth narratives in the Gospels, Bethlehem is never again mentioned in the New Testament. Thenceforth Jesus is known as Jesus of Nazareth, and it is this town, 15 miles west of the Sea of Galilee, that becomes a fixture of the New Testament. Unlike Bethlehem, Nazareth is not mentioned once in the Old Testament; the village was not occupied until the second or first century B.C.

When Was Jesus Born?

Sidebar to: O Little Town of … Nazareth?

Not only is there a problem determining where Jesus was born—pinpointing when he was born presents a challenge, too. Despite all the festivities celebrating New Year's 2000 as the 2,000th year since Jesus' birth, most scholars are certain that he was not born in that hazy period between 1 B.C. and 1 A.D. (remember, there is no year 0). In fact, he was probably born several years before then—a seeming paradox if ever there was one! But remember that "Before Christ" was a term established several centuries after Jesus.

The current dating system, which places January 1, 1 A.D., a week after Jesus' birth, was established in about 525 A.D. by Dionysius Exiguus (Dennis the Little), a Scythian monk, who hoped to repair a division in the church over the dates of Easter by preparing a new calendar. Rather than use the then-standard Diocletian system (counting the years since the reign of this late-third-century emperor, who had persecuted the Christians), Dionysius decided to count from Jesus' birth. To do this, he used an earlier calendric system, which dated to many centuries before Jesus' time—a Roman system based on the establishment of Rome. He fixed Jesus' birth date as December 25, 753 A.U.C. (*Ab Urbe Condita*, from the founding of the city of Rome). It is

not known how Dionysius chose that date. One theory is that he based it on the Book of Luke, which states that "Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work" (Luke 3:23) and that this occurred "in the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius" (Luke 3:1). Tiberius's reign began around 767 A.U.C., or 14 A.D., so 754 A.U.C. became 1 A.D. Dionysius's system of counting years gradually caught on: Charlemagne made it nearly universal in the ninth century, and the calendar we use today maintains Dionysius's calculations, with a few adjustments made by Pope Gregory in 1582. (Why December 25th was accepted as Jesus' birthday is even more obscure; it may be related to the Roman festival of Saturnalia, which was celebrated on that date. It may also be related to the Jewish tradition of performing circumcisions one week after a birth—in Jesus' case, on January 1.)

But Dionysius had miscalculated. As Matthew's Gospel tells us, Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great. Herod died in 4 B.C., as is known from outside sources, such as Josephus, and from the dates of contemporaneous Roman leaders. This means that Jesus must have been born before 4 B.C. Various calculations, based on astronomy, history and the Bible, have come up with dates between 7 and 4 B.C.—which means that we are already a few years into the second millennium! But that won't change anyone's plans, or their calendars.

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Where Was Jesus Born?

Bethlehem … Of Course

By Jerome Murphy-O'Connor

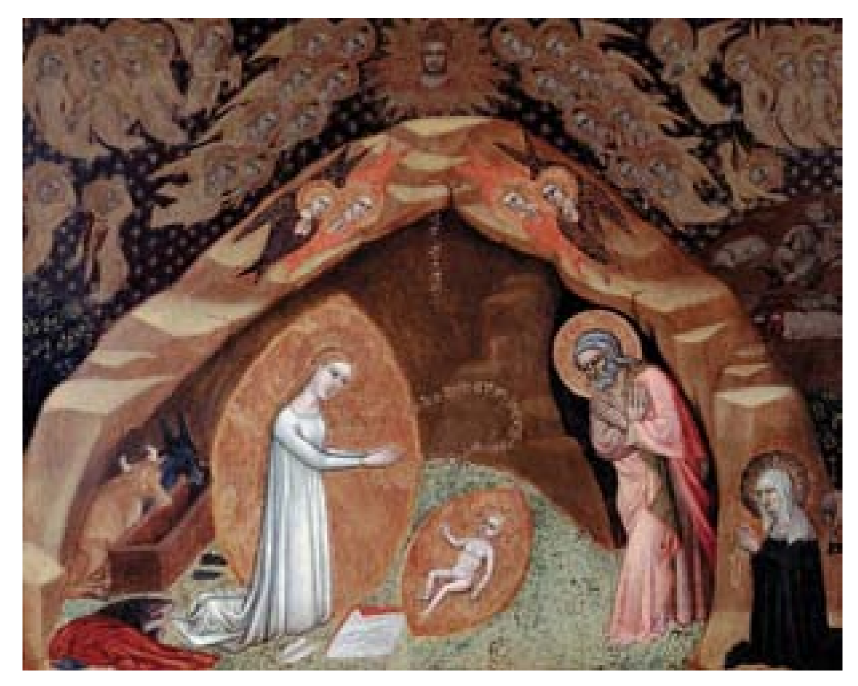


Photo Vatican Museums

A rocky cave provides shelter for the infant Jesus in "Saint Bridget and Her Vision of the Nativity," by the 14th-century Italian artist Niccoló di Tommaso. In the painting, Bridget (c. 1302–1373), the patron saint of Sweden, kneels at right. Bridget, who spent the latter half of her life on pilgrimages to Rome and the Holy Land, claimed to receive visions from Mary of the birth and passion of Jesus. These apparitions incorporate details from early Christian apocryphal texts that did not make it into the New Testament but were nevertheless widely read and illustrated.

The cave setting recalls the Protoevangelium of James, a second-century gospel in which Mary is overcome by labor pains en route to Bethlehem, and Joseph must direct her to the nearest private spot—a cave. It also recalls local Bethlehem tradition, which, since at least the second century A.D., has identified a Bethlehem cave (now beneath the Church of the Nativity) as the spot where Jesus was born.

Steve Mason has probably made the best case possible that we should adopt an "agnostic" position regarding the birthplace of Jesus. But although Mason has examined the literary data with exemplary care, he has failed to demolish the Gospels' conviction that Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the days of Herod the king. He has not even succeeded in bringing it into doubt.

Mason begins by saying that all the available evidence relating to the place of Jesus' birth must be taken into consideration before any location can be identified. I could not agree more. But the way Mason applies this principle does not inspire confidence. The archaeological evidence he presents is inadequate and dismissed far too quickly: "There is none," Mason claims. The Church of the Nativity, which still stands in Bethlehem, is irrelevant to Mason, who claims that Constantine probably selected the site of the church on the basis of the opening chapters of Matthew and Luke. But this is certainly wrong: We do have archaeological evidence from the Church of the Nativity.

The key factor in determining where the church should be built was a venerated cave, which lies beneath the apse of the church today (see the photos contained in the sidebar to this article). The cave is not mentioned either by Matthew or by Luke but appears in several other early Christian texts. According to the Christian apologist Justin Martyr (100–165 A.D.), when Joseph could not find room at the inn, "he moved into a certain cave near the village, and while they were there Mary brought forth the Christ and placed him in a manger."[1] Justin's information must derive from a specific Bethlehem tradition, which as a native of Palestine (he was born about 40 miles to the north, in Flavia Neapolis, modern Nablus); Justin was in a position to hear.

Some might argue that Justin invented the cave to fulfill a prophecy of Isaiah: "He [the Lord interpreted by Christians as the Christ] shall dwell in a lofty cavern of a strong rock" (Isaiah 33:16). But it is improbable that Justin invented the tradition. Justin would never have created a story that might lead his readers to conflate Jesus with the pagan deity Mithra, who was said to have been born from a rock and was worshiped in cave temples throughout the Roman world in Jesus' time.[a] Elsewhere, Justin shows that he is fully aware of the danger of parallels being drawn between Jesus and Mithra.

The tradition of Jesus' birth in a cave was also known independently to the anonymous second-century A.D. author of the *Protoevangelium of James*. According to this noncanonical gospel, Joseph and a pregnant Mary were traveling to Bethlehem when Mary cried, "Take me down from the ass, for the child within me presses me, to come forth."

Joseph asked, “Where shall I take you and hide your shame? For the place is a desert.” Joseph guided Mary into a nearby cave, where she gave birth. Later, a brilliant star directed the Magi to the cave.[2]

The Protoevangelium author’s ignorance of the geography of Palestine (for example, he thought the cave was outside Bethlehem) suggests that he was a native of, perhaps, Egypt or Syria. He must have heard about the cave from returning travelers.

That the cave had become the focus of pilgrimage is confirmed by the early church father Origen (185–254 A.D.), who reports that “there is shown at Bethlehem the cave where he [Jesus] was born.”[3] The cave apparently attracted regular visitors, including Origen himself sometime between 231 and 246 A.D.

It is difficult to imagine that the Bethlehemites invented the cave tradition, particularly because, as there is reason to suspect, the cave was not always accessible to Christians in the days of Justin and Origen. According to the church father Jerome (342–420 A.D.), who lived in Bethlehem from 386 A.D. until his death, the cave had been converted into a shrine dedicated to Adonis: “From Hadrian’s time [135 A.D.] until the reign of Constantine, for about 180 years…Bethlehem, now ours, and the earth’s, most sacred spot…was overshadowed by a grove of Thammuz,[b] which is Adonis, and in the cave where the infant Messiah once cried, the paramour of Venus was bewailed.”[4]

Local Christians were probably not permitted to worship regularly in what had become a pagan shrine. The fact that the Bethlehemites did not simply select another site as the birth cave suggests that they did not feel free to invent. They were bound to a specific cave.[5] To preserve a local memory for almost 200 years implies a very strong motivation, a motivation that has nothing to do with the Gospels. With this in mind, let us evaluate the texts cited by Mason.

All that Mason says about the silence of Paul, Acts, Mark, John and some Jewish and Roman historians who fail to mention Jesus’ birthplace is irrelevant. Deductions from silence will appeal only to those who have already made up their minds. The most that we can derive from these sources is that Jesus was believed to have come from Nazareth. Therefore, we must focus exclusively on those two writers who do mention his birthplace—Matthew and Luke.

Mason has well brought out that Matthew and Luke offer us “irreconcilably different” accounts of Jesus’ birth: For Matthew, the story begins in Bethlehem, where Mary and Joseph live; Herod’s slaughter of the innocents forces the family to move to Egypt, then on to Nazareth. In Luke, however, the family lives in Nazareth and only travels to Bethlehem for a census, at

which time Jesus is born. What Mason fails to appreciate, however, is that Matthew 1–2 and Luke 1–2 are completely independent witnesses. One does not borrow from the other, nor do they both draw on a common source. This only enhances the reliability of the points on which they agree. According to Matthew, "Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king" (2:1). Luke mentions "the days of Herod, king of Judea" (1:5) as the period of the annunciation of the birth of John the Baptist, which was separated from that of Jesus by only a few months. Jesus' birth took place after a journey "to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem" (2:4). The two evangelists, therefore, independently confirm each other as to the time and place of Jesus' birth.

With regard to Matthew's birth narrative (Matthew 1–2), Mason asks whether the evangelist might have written Jesus' story in a way that makes it seem to fulfill Old Testament prophecy. Mason points out that at the end of each movement in Matthew's birth narrative we find a quotation from the Old Testament introduced by a formula emphasizing the idea of fulfillment: "All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet" (Matthew 1:22, 2:5, 15, 17, 23). Mason asks: "Is it more likely that the author included a Bethlehem birth for Jesus because he knew that this had in fact happened or because he knew of the passage in scripture ["But you, O Bethlehem,…from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel" (Micah 5:1–3 = Matthew 2:6)] and thought it important to describe Jesus' career in the language of the prophets?" Mason invites the reader to accept the second option by showing (quite accurately) how, later in the gospel, Matthew tends to adjust the story of Jesus' life based on certain Old Testament prophesies. For example, Matthew's version of Jesus entering Jerusalem on the back of a donkey and its colt (Matthew 21:1–9) is strongly influenced by the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9 ("Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey").

But does this mean that Jesus never rode into Jerusalem? Of course not! Matthew's primary source for the episode of the entry into Jerusalem is Mark 11:1–10, which describes Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a colt. It was this story in Mark that led Matthew to use Isaiah 62:11 and Zechariah 9:9 to bring out the significance of the event. In other words, an event evoked the prophecy; the prophecy was not the source of the event, even though it did influence the way it was presented in Matthew's later gospel.

This example of Matthew's literary technique establishes the way each of the "fulfillment" prophecies in the first two chapters in his gospel must be approached. Matthew's source(s) triggered recollections of Old Testament prophecies, which Matthew then incorporated when he rewrote the story. One cannot seriously imagine an evangelist thumbing his way through his

sacred scriptures in search of quotations on which to embroider a story. Simple common sense tells us it was much more a question of “Hey! That reminds me of something in Isaiah!”

For the sake of argument, I will accept Mason’s claims that the episodes involving the “mysterious star” guiding the Magi (Matthew 2:1–12) and Herod’s massacre of the innocents (Matthew 2:16–18) are not historical.[6] But what has this to do with the gospel’s unequivocal and unexceptional assertion that Jesus was born in Bethlehem? Mason invites his readers to assume that all the details in Matthew’s birth narrative are fabricated simply because these two episodes are fabricated. But falsehood is not a toxic gas that affects everything around it.



Superstock

A family tree worth boasting about. To establish Jesus as the Messiah, both Matthew and Luke list his genealogy—as far back as Abraham in the former and all the way to Adam in the latter. In both versions, the lineage passes through David, the tenth-century B.C. king of Israel. This 12th-century A.D. window from the Cathedral of Chartres traces the multiple generations from David’s grandfather Jesse, who reclines at the bottom, to Jesus himself. The stained-glass Tree of Jesse illustrates Isaiah 11:1–3: “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him”—a prediction that the Messiah will come from the House of David.

Now let us turn to Luke. Mason recognizes (as do all scholars) that the census mentioned in Luke (2:1–2) took place in 6 A.D., which is far too late to be of any relevance to the birth of Jesus in the days of Herod the king (37–4 B.C.): In other words, Joseph and Mary could not have been traveling to Bethlehem for this census. Thus, the linchpin of Luke's narrative slips out, and the story fragments into a number of individual, unrelated elements. But the fact that Luke is wrong on X (the census) does not necessarily mean that he is wrong on Y (the location of Jesus' birth).

Finally, we come to Mason's conclusions. Mason's reason for evoking New Testament documents such as Mark and Paul, which say nothing about the birthplace of Jesus, only now becomes apparent. In Mason's view, the silence of these writers indicates that "it was fairly late when some Christians first became more interested in the question [of where Jesus had been born]." Now, it might be fairly late when some Christians wrote about the birthplace of Jesus, but that says nothing about when they first became interested in or knowledgeable about the subject.

Mason continues, "Even by the time of Matthew and Luke, reliable information about Jesus' birth was no longer available." Nothing in his article lays the ground for such a statement. Matthew and Luke are unreliable on some points, but Mason has not demonstrated that the birthplace of Jesus is one of them.

Assuming that reliable information was unavailable to Matthew and Luke, Mason postulates that one of their sources created the story: "These authors [Matthew and Luke] took the basic proposition (probably from an earlier, now-lost source) that Jesus, the son of David, had been born in Bethlehem before Joseph and Mary had become intimate. This proposition could easily have originated in reflection upon Micah 5:2."

The idea that birth narratives as different as those of Matthew and Luke could go back to a common source boggles the mind. It would have been most interesting to see Mason even begin to attempt to outline the contents of such a source. Matthew, as we have seen, did not generate events on the basis of prophecy. On the contrary, he used prophecies to bring out the meaning of events otherwise attested. There is no hint that Micah 5:2 was of any importance for Luke. It is implausible, therefore, to infer that he derived his choice of Jesus' birthplace from this prophecy. Nor did he derive it from Matthew, whose version of the childhood of Jesus he did not know. The one option left is that Luke knew it for a fact.

One concluding observation: Mason claims that "establishing some kind of connection with David might have been critical for a messianic figure…in Jesus' time." He writes: "A birth in Bethlehem, King David's place of origin, would naturally cement Jesus' Jewish messianic

affiliation." But during Jesus' lifetime, belief that he was the Messiah did not require seeing him as the son of David (and therefore did not benefit from any connection with Bethlehem). In this period, the Davidic Messiah was not the only type of Messiah hoped for. Priest, prophet and teacher figures were also expected.[7] It would have been much easier for a contemporary to have fitted Jesus into any one of these categories. (Remember, his mother was related to Elizabeth, a descendant of Aaron, the first priest [Luke 1:5, 36].) None of these other messianic categories had any connection with Bethlehem. In consequence, Jesus could have been thought of as a Messiah without any reference to Bethlehem.

Furthermore, of the many different categories of Messiah, that of Davidic Messiah would have been the least likely match for Jesus in the eyes of his contemporaries. Indeed, Jesus' behavior was the antithesis of that of a son of David, who was expected to be a warrior king who would rule with supreme authority. This hope is expressed most vividly in the first-century B.C. Psalms of Solomon:

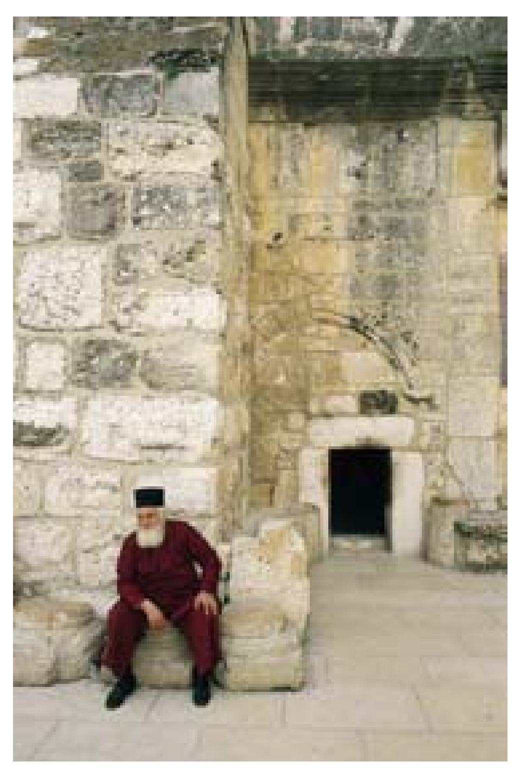
> See, Lord, and raise up for them their king, the Son of David, to rule over your servant Israel in the time known to you, O God. Undergird him with the strength to destroy the unrighteous rulers, to purge Jerusalem from Gentiles who trample her to destruction; in wisdom and in righteousness to drive out the sinners from the inheritance; to smash the arrogance of sinners like a potter's jar; to shatter all their substance with an iron rod; to destroy the unlawful nations with the word of his mouth.[8]

Jesus, on the contrary, was the friend of tax collectors and sinners. He made no move against the Roman occupiers or the absentee landlords. He had no political agenda, and his compassion for the poor and disadvantaged was individual, not national. Moreover, he seems to have reacted against the idea of a royal Messiah.[9]

If the early church thought of Jesus in terms of Davidic messianism—and it certainly did[10]—it was not because of anything he said or did but because of who he was and where he came from. And he came from Bethlehem.

The Church of the Nativity

Sidebar to: Bethlehem … Of Course



Garo Nalbandian

The small, unassuming entrance (above) to the Church of the Nativity (below) in Bethlehem belies the importance of this site to Christianity. The infant Jesus is said to have been born here, in a small cave beneath the floor of the church. Today, a golden star in the cave floor (below) marks the traditional spot of Jesus' birth.

The first Christian emperor, Constantine, had the original Church of the Nativity constructed above the site. Dedicated on May 31, 339 B.C., Constantine's church consisted of a square hall (about 90 feet on each side) divided by four rows of columns into a hall with four aisles. At the northeastern end of the church, directly above the cave, was a raised octagonal apse, each side of which was 15 feet long. Pilgrims could view the cave through a 13-foot-wide hole in the center of the apse floor.

In the late fourth century, the church father Jerome moved to Bethlehem, where he translated the Old and New Testaments into Latin—a translation known as the Vulgate because it was done in the "vulgar," or "common," language of his day. Legend has it that Jerome used one of the caves beneath the church (adjacent to the nativity cave) as his study.

The church was at least partially razed in the sixth century by the Byzantine emperor Justinian, who then built a larger edifice on Constantine's foundations. Justinian had his builders imitate the style of the original church's columns, leading many modern investigators to believe that all of the capitals date to Constantine. Since Justinian's day, only a few changes have been made to the building, in spite of earthquake and fire.



Garo Nalbandian



Garo Nalbandian

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Notes

Witnessing the Divine

a. On the variations in the gospel accounts of the Nativity, see "Where Was Jesus Born?" **BR** 16:01, a debate between Steve Mason and Jerome Murphy-O'Connor.

b. For more on the mosaics of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, see Dennis Groh, "The Arian Controversy: How It Divided Early Christianity," **BR** 10:01.

c. An infancy gospel is an apocryphal (noncanonical) gospel that recounts stories about Jesus' and Mary's parents as well as about Jesus' birth and childhood.

d. See Ronald Hock (article) and David Cartlidge (captions), "The Favored One," **BR** 17:03.

1. The painting appears in the catacomb's Capella Graeca. A short, general discussion of the art is found in Neil MacGregor, *Seeing Salvation: Images of Christ in Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2000); and an older and finely detailed collection was done by Henri Leclercq, "Mages," in the *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie* 10.1 (1920), pp. 980–1070.

2. On the development of the feast of Epiphany (which means "appearance" or "manifestation"), and the relative place of the Nativity, the baptism of Jesus, the miracle at Cana and the arrival of the magi as celebrated on this day, see Thomas Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (New York: Pueblo, 1986), pp. 144–147, in which Talley shows that the development of January 6 as a celebration of the visit of the magi emerges when the date of the Feast of the Nativity is firmly established as December 25 (rather than January 6), and generally should be dated no earlier than the late fourth century. The Latin-speaking West shows this development earlier than the Greek or Syriac-speaking East, as shown by Augustine's sermons and Prudentius's hymn written for the feast of the Epiphany. See Augustine, *Sermons* 199, 200, 201, 202, 203 and 204; Prudentius, *Hymn* 12.

The determination of the 12 days between Jesus' birth and the magi's arrival in Bethlehem was most likely due to the reconciliation of the two different dates for Christmas in the first centuries (December 25 and January 6). Still, not everyone agreed, and different calculations remained. For instance, see Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion* 51.22.17, who not only argues that the magi took two years to arrive, but that they arrived on what he claimed to be the "very day of Epiphany"—the eighth day before the Ides of January, or 13 days after the increase of daylight (probably January 6 or 7, depending on which calendar he was using).

3. The unidentified author (Pseudo John Chrysostom) of the fifth- or sixth-century *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaeum, Homily* 2.2 (*Patrologia Graeca* 56:637–638) gives this number, probably on the basis of an apocryphal gospel attributed to Seth. This Syrian tradition had a parallel in parts of the Armenian Church. Also see the seventh- or eighth-century *Chronicle of Zuqnin* in which 12 magi are described as seeing different faces in the star, each a different age. Leo's enumeration appears in *Sermon* 31.1, 36.1.

4. The eastern literature (Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopic, Armenian, Georgian and Persian) contained the greatest variety in names. The first documented appearance of the names in the West seems to be in the *Excerpta latin barbari*, ed. Theodore Mommsen, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica:* AA 9, *Chronica minora* 1 (Berlin, 1892), p. 278 (cited by R. McNally, "The Three Holy Kings in Early Irish Writing," in *Kyriakon: Festschrift Johannes Quasten*, ed. Patrick Granfield and Josef Jungmann, [Münster/Westfalen, 1970], vol. 2, p. 670, n. 14). A detailed study of the names of the magi is by Bruce Metzger, "Names for the Nameless in the New Testament: A Study in the Growth of Christian Tradition," Kyriakon,

vol. 1, pp. 79–85. See also Hugo Kehrer, *Die Heiligen Drei Könige in Literatur und Kunst*, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1908–1909; reprint: Hildesheim, 1976), vol. 1., p. 68ff; and A. Bludau, "Namen der Namenlosen in den Evangelien," *Theologie und Glaube* 21 (1928), p. 275ff.

5. Richard C. Trexler, *The Journey of the Magi: Meanings in History of a Christian Story* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press), pp. 44–52. In 1903 the cardinal of Cologne sent some of the relics back to Milan.

6. Protevangelium James 21.1–3, in *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 1, ed. Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), p. 386.

7. Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 77.4, 78.1. Although it might seem a stretch to the modern reader, Justin identifies Herod with the king of Assyria.

8. Tertullian, *On Idolatry* 9. This reading is repeated in the sixth century in a sermon of Caesarius of Arles, who (in his *Sermon on the Epiphany*, 194) describes the journey of the magi as a spiritual pilgrimage of conversion. See also Tertullian, *Adversus Marcion* 3.13.

9. Their outfits are also the standard costume worn by the popular mystery gods Orpheus and Mithras in late antiquity. Concerning their dress, see Thomas Mathews, *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993), p. 84. Here Mathews also makes this point about Orpheus. Mathews also cites Franz Cumont's analysis of their dress as replicating that of captive barbarians. See Cumont, "L'adoration des Mages et l'art triumphal de Rome," *Memorie della Pontificia Accademia Roma di Archeologia* 3 (1932–1933), pp. 81–105. On Orpheus's role in Christian art, see Robin Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); and M. Charles Murray, *Rebirth and Afterlife: A Study of the Transmutation of Some Pagan Images in Early Christian Art* (Oxford: BAR, 1981), pp. 37–63. On the comparison with Mithras, see Leroy A. Campbell, *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology* (Leiden: Brill, 1968).

10. Mathews (*Clash*, pp. 79–81) makes this point and argues against earlier analyses that the parallelism between the two sets of three orientally dressed characters was simply a case of mistaken identity. We also might recall that the three youths in the furnace were not alone. From a traditional Christian perspective, the fourth figure who appeared "like a God" (Daniel 3:25) was a precursor of Christ.

11. Origen, *Contra Celsus* 1.49–50. Also see Origen's *Homilies on Numbers* 13.7, 15.4 on Balaam; as well as his commentary *On Genesis* 14.3 (in which he sees Abimelech, Ochozath and Philcol as prefiguring the magi).

12. On the story of Balaam as background to the Gospel Matthew, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), pp. 190–196. Also see Jerome's *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* 1.2.

13. Tertullian, for instance, in his treatise *Adversus Marcion* 3.13, reads Psalm 72 in this way, and understands the magi "as like kings" (*fere reges*). On their royal status, see also Caesarius of Arles.

14. Prudentius, for example, speaks of the magi as Persian. See Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 1.15; and John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew* 6.2.

15. See a discussion of this in *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, ed. Jean Vercoutter, Jean Leclant, Frank M. Snowden and Jehan Desanges (New York: Morrow, 1976), vols. 2 and 3.

16. Some art historians have claimed that the magi are supposed to look like defeated and tribute-bearing barbarians, offering their homage to an earthly ruler. See Cumont, "L'adoration des Mages et l'art triumphal de Rome," pp. 81–105; and André Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of its Origins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 44–45. This interpretation is often applied to the mosaics from Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome (c. 430) and Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, where Jesus and Mary are seated on a throne. However, as Mathews argues in *Clash of Gods*, one may argue that the image of Jesus enthroned suggests the transcendence of imperial power rather than the ratification of it.

17. Irenaeus, *Adversus omnes Haerses* 3.9. In the fifth century, Leo the Great repeats this interpretation in Sermon 33, 34, 36 where he speaks of the One Person with a "three-fold function": God, mortal human, and king. Compare Fulgentius of Ruspe (a North African writer, c. 467–533), *Letter to Ferrandus* 20.

18. Leo, *Sermon* 34.4 (my paraphrase). I have discovered that Otto Georg Von Simson made this same connection in *Sacred Fortress: Byzantine Art and Statecraft in Ravenna* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1948; reprint Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1987), p. 89.

The Magi and the Star

a. The situation is complicated by the Gospel of Luke, however, which indicates that Jesus was born during a worldwide census conducted by the Syrian governor; from extrabiblical sources, we know of a census conducted in 6 C.E. (although not of the scope described by Luke). Most scholars find the worldwide census described in Luke too improbable to be historical and thus favor the account in Matthew. See the discussion by Jerome Murphy-O'Connor and Steve Mason in "Where Was Jesus Born?" **BR** 16:01.

b. But see "The Stars in the Heavens—Many or a Few?" **BR** 03:03.

c. More accurately 7/6 B.C.E., since the Babylonian lunar year began at the vernal equinox (March/April).

d. One for 71 B.C.E., in four copies, and one for 69 B.C.E., in five copies.

e. With the establishment of Greek control over the Near East after the conquests of Alexander the Great (fourth century B.C.E.) the most important Babylonian gods became syncretized with Greek ones. Thus Ishtar, the goddess of love and beauty, was equated with Aphrodite; Marduk, the king of gods, was equated with Zeus; Nergal, the god of war, was equated with Ares; and so on. The Greeks also adapted from the Babylonians the idea of associating the leading gods of their pantheon with planets, stars and days of the week. These associations were later taken over by the Romans, who in their turn equated Greek gods with their own.

f. For another theory on how a star could lead the magi, see Dale C. Allison, Jr., "What Was the Star that Guided the Magi?" **BR** 09:06.

1. The American astronomer Michael Molnar recently presented a theory that the star of Bethlehem should be identified with two occultations of Jupiter by the moon in Aries in 6 B.C.E. (Molnar, *The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi* [New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1999]). This theory must be rejected, however, since in Babylonian astrology the occultation of Jupiter by the moon signified the death of a great king and famine in the West, that is, exactly the opposite of what a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn portended. See Hermann Hunger and Simo Parpola, "Bedeckungen des Planeten Jupiter durch den Mond," *Archiv für Orientforschung*, 29/30 (1983/84), pp. 46–49.

2. Heikki Tuori, "The Star of Bethlehem and the Computer," *Uusi Suomi* 8.1 (1976) (in Finnish).

What Was the Star that Guided the Magi?

1. Review of discussion in Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), pp. 170–173 also Ernest L. Martin, *The Birth of Christ Recalculated* (Pasadena, CA: Foundation for Biblical Research, 1980), pp. 4–25.

2. St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew* 6:3.

3. Plato, in fact, contended that the entire cosmos is a living creature, see *Timaeus* 30B; so too the Stoics. Aristotle's thinking on the subject of stars is inconsistent from text to text. "On the question of whether the stars themselves are *empsucha* [ensouled] he seems to have found it difficult to make up his mind" (W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy: VI. Aristotle: An Encounter* [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981], p. 256, n. 1).

4. Philo, *De Plantatione*

5. Philo, *De Somniis* 1.135; see also *De Opificio Mundi* 73.

6. Cf. Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1973), p. 70.

7. Daniel 8:10; . 1 Enoch 43:1–4, 86:1–6, 90:20–7; Pseudo-Philo, *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* 32:15; *Joseph and Aseneth* 14; Revelation 1:20, 9:21, 12:4; Testament of Solomon 20:14–7; 2 Enoch 29; and Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 43a–b. Particularly interesting is 3 Enoch 46, according to which stars have spirits and wings and sing God's praises.

8. Cf. 1 Enoch 1–36; Testament of Levi 2–5; Revelation; Testament of Abraham 10–15; 3 Baruch; 2 Enoch; Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah 6–11; etc.

9. Life of Adam and Eve 9:1, in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols., ed. James H. Charlesworth (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983–1985), vol. 2; Testament of Job 3:1, 4:1, 5:2, in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1.

10. 1QS 3:20 1QM 13:9–10.

11. *Joseph and Aseneth*, chap. 14, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol 2, pp. 224–225.

12. 1 Enoch 86:1ff. offers the same picture. In Isaiah 14:12 we read: "How you are fallen from heaven, Day Star [= Latin Lucifer], son of Dawn!"

13. Origen, see esp. *On First Principles* 1.7; cf. *Contra Celsum* 5.11; Jerome, *Epistle to Avitus* 4.

14. Cf. Jerome, *To Pammachius against John of Jerusalem* 17; Justinian, *Epistle to Mannam—Mansi* 9.513.

WHERE WAS JESUS BORN?

O Little Town of…Nazareth?

a. See, for example, John G. Gager, "Paul's Contradictions: Can They Be Resolved?" **BR** 14:06, and the response by Ben Witherington, "Laying Down the Law," **BR** 15:02.

b. The term *synoptic*, from Greek for "seeing together," refers to the fact that when the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke are printed side by side in three parallel columns, their numerous correspondences can be "seen together" at a glance.

c. On the hypothesized Gospel of Q, see Stephen J. Patterson, "Q—The Lost Gospel," **BR** 09:05, and "Yes, Virginia, There Is a Q," **BR** 11:05.

d. See J. Edward Barrett, "Can Scholars Take the Virgin Birth Seriously?" **BR** 04:05.

e. The author of Matthew misunderstood the rhetorical device called *hendiadys*, often used in Hebrew poetry, in which a term is repeated and preceded with the particle, often translated "and." The second mention of the term actually modifies the first. See Harvey Minkoff, "Searching for the Better Text," **BR** 15:04. For another example of Matthew accommodating the story to scripture, see the case of Judas's death (Matthew 26:15, 27:3–10), which is presented as fulfilling a scripture citation in wording but does not agree with Luke's account (Acts 1:16–20).

1. I do not claim that the arguments presented here are original. The editors of **BR** have invited me to make a summary statement on the issue in conjunction with year 2000 celebrations.

2. In the ancient Mediterranean, one's ancestry was public business. Membership in the aristocracy was a condition of success in many spheres. City or town of origin was considered important, even if one had long since moved from the family home and birthplace. Unprecedented numbers of people traveled on the long Roman roads and relatively safe Roman seas; nevertheless, men from the eastern Mediterranean, who lacked the traditional three Roman names, were usually known as "*X* of *Y*," where *Y* was the ancestral home (Greek, *patris* or *oikos*)—Justus of Tiberias, Ptolemy of Ascalon, Nicolas of Damascus and so on. Even villages could be important for identifying someone. In discussing events in Galilee, Josephus distinguishes those whose ancestry was in a particular town from those who were merely living there but had their family heritage elsewhere (Josephus, *Life* 16.126,142,162). For everyday purposes, Judea and Galilee were much like other Mediterranean locales in this respect.

3. My assumptions about the authorship and dating of these texts are generally accepted in New Testament scholarship and are presented as standard views in universities, seminaries and many Bible colleges. A detailed and balanced account may be found in E.P. Sanders and Margaret Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990). See also Steve Mason and Tom Robinson, eds., *An Early Christian Reader* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, forthcoming).

4. Several prophetic texts had promised a restoration of King David's ancient throne, which had been lost at the time of the Babylonian destruction in 586 B.C. In the Book of Samuel, the Lord sends David the following message: "When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom…I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me…Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever" (2 Samuel 7:12–16); see also Isaiah 9:7. For the hopes for David's royal descendant Zerubbabel after the Exile, see Haggai 2:20–23; Zechariah 4:6–10;

see also Sirach 49:11; 1 Maccabees 2:57; 2 Esdras 12:32; Psalms of Solomon 17; and frequent mentions in rabbinic literature. Although it is doubtful that physical descent from David could be confidently traced a thousand years after he had died, establishing some kind of connection with David might have been critical for a messianic figure or other leader in Jesus' time. According to the fourth-century church historian Eusebius, the emperor Domitian (81–96 A.D.) launched a campaign against descendants of David because he was afraid of the competition (Eusebius, *Church History* 3.19–20). The story itself is unlikely, but it highlights the importance of Davidic lineage in Christian thinking at least. And when Rabbi Akiva allegedly endorsed Simeon bar-Kokhba, leader of the Second Jewish Revolt against Rome (132–135 A.D.), as the Messiah, one of his colleagues is said to have demurred on the ground that this man was not a descendant of David (Jerusalem Talmud, *Ta'anit* 4.5 [68d]). See Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1979), p. 674. In later periods, both the Jewish patriarchs and the heads of the Babylonian Jewish communities would be furnished with suitable Davidic ancestries (*Genesis Rabbah* 33). See, conveniently, Isaiah Gafni, "The World of the Talmud," in Hershel Shanks, ed., *Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism: A Parallel History of Their Origins and Early Development* (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1992), pp. 229, 248, 263. The medieval *Seder Olam Zutta* traced a Davidic lineage for the Babylonian exilarch. So lineage in general was important, and many considered Davidic lineage essential for messianic figures. The Dead Sea Scrolls and other texts indicate that some groups hoped for priestly and/or prophetic anointed figures (messiahs). So, too, the Talmud reflects a variety of messianic hopes, even though the dominant language speaks of the "Son of David." See Jacob Neusner, Messiah in *Context: Israel's History and Destiny in Formative Judaism* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1984).

5. Further, for the Synoptics, the extensive literary borrowing, the thematic arrangement of discrete episodes (e.g., conflict stories, teaching examples) with only the loosest chronological links, and the free adjustment of this material for literary purposes indicate that the authors—like other ancient biographers—are weaving material relayed to them by tradition rather than simply reporting what they saw.

6. My basic point would remain intact; however, even if it turned out that the texts had some other relationship.

7. In Matthew 1:2–17, the numbers of generations in each block are actually 13, 14, 13 instead of the three 14-generation blocks claimed by the author.

8. On the various patterns, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), pp. 48–54, 96–121. The powerful Matthean literary themes of scriptural continuity and the coming of foreigners into salvation (the Magi; cf. Matthew 8:11–13, 28:16–20) can hardly be missed.

9. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 14–17.

10. Whereas Matthew locates Jesus' gradual rejection by Israel near the middle of the story (Matthew 11–12), Luke delays this until the very end of Jesus' life, when he encounters the Temple authorities in Jerusalem (Luke 19:47); and it is only in the second volume, which we know as Acts, after the proclamation of Jesus' resurrection, that Israel in general rejects him. Throughout Luke and the early chapters of Acts, Jesus and his followers remain steadfastly committed to the laws of Moses, and they get along fairly well with Pharisees and common people (see Luke 7:36, 11:37, 13:31, 14:1, 17:20–21, 19:39; Acts 5:33–42).

11. Once again, we have reason to be suspicious. Just as in Matthew, certain elements of Luke's birth account do not appear to be straight reporting but reflections of the author's own habits of thought, as expressed in the rest of the Gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles (which was written by the author of Luke). The birth account displays the author's ongoing interest in John the Baptist, whose work he will describe in detail (Luke 3:1–20, 7:18–35; Acts 1:5, 22, 10:37, 11:16, 13:24–25, 18:25, 19:3–4); his pronounced theme of reversal (Luke 1:53; cf. 6:21–25); his preservation of a classic Jewish messianic hope, according to which Jesus will ultimately restore the throne to Israel (Luke 1:33, 74; cf. Acts 1:6); and his unique connection of Christian origins with external political events (cf. Luke 3:1).

12. Josephus, *The Jewish War* 2.117–118; *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.1–11.

13. The classic discussion of the well-known historical issues related to the census is in Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, ed. Geza Vermes et al., 3 vol. in 4 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1973–1987), vol. 1, pp. 399–427.

14. Most striking is the absence of Bethlehem from Acts. There the author of Luke takes every opportunity to use Old Testament scriptures to prove to Jewish audiences that Jesus was the Messiah (e.g., Acts 2:22–36, 4:8–30, 7:2–53, 13:16–43). Micah 5:2 would have been an obvious choice.

Bethlehem in the Bible

Sidebar to: O Little Town of…Nazareth?

a. Some scholars claim that the parenthetical phrase “that is, Bethlehem” is a later gloss, and that Rachel is buried in Benjamin, near Ramah, as described in 1 Samuel 10:2.

Where Was Jesus Born?

Bethlehem…Of Course

a. Mithraism was a mystery religion that arose in the Mediterranean world at the same time as Christianity. Temples to the god Mithra, who was thought to have sprung from the rock, were built underground, in imitation of caves. See David Ulansey, “Solving the Mithraic Mysteries,” *BAR* 20:05.

b. Thammuz is an Eastern pagan deity associated with Adonis.

1. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 78.6.

The term *apologist* refers to early Christian writers who tried to defend and promote their faith in their writings. In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin Martyr explains why he believes Jesus should be understood as the Messiah of the Old Testament.

2. Protoevangelium of James 17–21, quoted in Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 1, *Gospels and Related Writings*, rev. ed., English trans. ed. by R. McWilson (Tübingen: Mohr, 1990; Cambridge, UK: James Clark & Co. and Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1991), pp. 433–435.

3. Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.51.

4. Jerome, Epistle 58.

5. For the location of the cave in the first-century town, see Shemaryahu Gutman and A. Berman, “Bethléem,” *Revue biblique* 77 (1970), pp. 583–585. The excavation of the cave is reported by Benjamin Baggati, “Recenti Scavi a Betlemme,” *Liber Annuus* 18 (1968), pp. 181–237.

6. Nevertheless, I disagree with Mason’s reading of both accounts. In both instances Mason’s approach is decidedly unsophisticated. He is oblivious to the distinction between source and redaction in Matthew 2:1–12 and fails to appreciate the real import of Matthew 2:16–18, which is revealed by the “fulfillment” quotation of Jeremiah 31:15. This citation focuses on Ramah, which for Jeremiah (40:1) was the place where the Jews to be deported to Babylon were assembled. The slaughter of the babies has much more to do with the flight into Egypt than with Bethlehem itself.

7. See John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: The Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature* (Doubleday: New York, 1995), p. 209; William Horbury, *Jewish Messianism and the Cult of Christ* (London: SCM, 1998).

8. Psalms of Solomon 17.21–24. For this theme in other texts, see Collins, *Scepter and the Star*, pp. 49–73.

9. See J.D.G. Dunn, “Messianic Ideas and Their Influence on the Jesus of History,” in *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992), pp. 373–376.

10. See John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew—Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 1, *The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), pp. 216–219.

